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RED POPPIES

MARGARETE
MÜNSTERBERG

1. Fiction, American

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RED POPPIES

A NOVEL

BY

MARGARETE MÜNSTERBERG

Author of "Anna Borden's Career"

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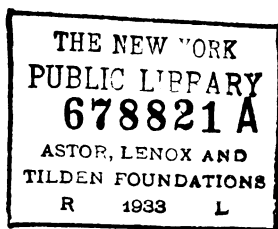


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UNCLE OTTO

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RED POPPIES

CHAPTER I

THE VISION

WAS it morning so soon? Was it a sunbeam that had waked him up, knocking on his eyelids with a hearty knock? Come in, sunbeam! Welcome, morning! Oh, but the dreams one can have in this strange, great, wide bed with the blue canopy—dreams—of what? Peter had forgotten. No, the morning was best, after all, the jolly, golden morning.

So Peter jumped out of bed and ran to the open window, where the sunbeam that had waked him was making a golden gleam on the panes. Peter had never waked up in any bed but his own before, and it was wonderful to run to the window and look out and see something new. It was quite new to look on a barnyard across the road instead of the solemn white house that Peter saw from his window at home. A barnyard with white hens and black hens and speckled hens and a proud rooster, and behind the barnyard a little sparkling brook with a bridge over it and thick woods beyond!

Peter stamped his bare foot on the solid floor to feel that he was at his grandmother's all alive and real, and not only making believe or in his sleep. They had promised him this visit to his grandmother's so long, till he had been afraid that it would never happen at

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all, and then, when he and his mother had really left home, the journey had been so long—Oh, so almost endless, that Peter had believed this whole visit to be a kind of mischievous trick, a game played on a naughty boy. But the journey did have an end, and Peter had been lifted out of the train in the black night, and then lifted into a carriage, and then——

Oh, what funny wallpaper, with ships and houses and trees on it—always the same ships and houses and trees, all over the wall! Quite a picture-book that was for rainy days! But there were real pictures too on the picture-book wallpaper, very dark, very sad-looking pictures. No—he would not look at them now, he would get dressed quickly—all alone, secretly—and then slip out of doors into the sunshine, before anyone else in the house was awake.

There was surely no harm in skipping out of doors early in the morning, and yet Peter, when he had finished putting on his sailor-suit, crept on tiptoes out of the room into the strange narrow hallway. The truth was that Peter was afraid of a meeting on the stairs with his grandmother, whom he would not know again in the morning, so sleepy had he been last night when he had arrived and seen her as in a queer dream. But old, old grandmothers would not be up so early anyway, and mothers would be resting from the long journey, and only little boys would be up and out in the sunshine.

At the end of the long, strange corridor there was a square place, which was not exactly a hall and not a real room either, where something uncanny stood in a corner that looked like a wheel with fuzzy gray hair—a spinning-wheel, truly, like the one that pricked the

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Sleeping Beauty and made her sleep in a hedge of thorns till the *Prince* came and waked her up. Peter thought he would like to have a little adventure—not like finding a princess asleep in a hedge, nothing that would make one shy like that, but just a nice, little adventure for a little boy. Because, after all, what else did one go away from home for?

Peter crept down the steep, white stairs that had a funny way of turning, and then stopped in the hall below, wondering through which of the two opposite doors to go out: one was a great, heavy, white door, the house door, no doubt—the other was smaller, and open a little, with only the screen-door shut, so that something green was peeping at Peter from outside. Could this door lead to the garden—grandmother's garden that Peter's mother had often told him about?

Carefully Peter opened the door, then the screen-door, and then he looked——

Oh!—Was it true? Peter clapped his hands, Peter laughed; Peter felt so queer, he felt so queer and happy. It was so beautiful, so altogether wonderful, it made him almost cry—no, it made him laugh; it made him dance and skip; it made him want to run a race—no, it made him stand quite still and wonder. What was it that Peter saw in his grandmother's garden that gave him such a shock of joy? It was poppies, red poppies—a big, blazing burst of red poppies! Peter knew poppies. He had seen pink and white poppies before, and red poppies, too, single poppies on slim stems in gardens, or poppies in little clusters, or beds with poppies of different shades; but he had never seen poppies, poppies, poppies so close together that they were all one and all

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red. And such a red! It was not at all like a common red—not like the red on his mother's hat, or the red of the tablecloth in the playroom at home—no, it was blood-red, it was like the red of the sun when it rose late on winter mornings so that Peter could see it from the playroom window, and it looked like bloody fire; it was a red that made one want to do something very great, very noble, something very much like a hero—.

Red poppies! Red poppies! Were they quite true? Would they be here the next moment, or would he wake up and find himself alone, with no poppies at all—? Peter shut his eyes to make quite sure; he shut his eyes a long, long time, and prayed that when he opened them again, the red poppies would still be true.

And Peter opened his eyes again. Wonder upon wonder! In the midst of the poppies stood a child with big, shining eyes, and the sunbeams on her golden hair. She seemed a fairy among the high red poppies that reached almost to her shoulders. And behind the child and the poppies, by the garden gate, stood a beautiful lady, with silky dark hair and eyes clear gray, like the sea on some misty days—a lady that must have just stepped out of a book of fairy tales. Peter wished that he had never been bad, that he had never hidden his mother's work-basket and never stolen jam out of the pantry—just because of that beautiful lady, who could never have been bad and who must be some good child's fairy godmother.

And Peter looked at the child among the poppies, who tossed back her head a little and laughed gaily. Then it seemed to Peter as if all the bright red poppies were laughing with her, and Peter's heart was so full of joy that he laughed too. He did not laugh aloud, he did not laugh as

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he used to do, when his father would tell him a funny story, or when the postman would make faces at him, and yet Peter knew that he was laughing as he had never laughed before. "Red poppies! Red poppies! Red poppies!" was all that he could say, and he said it over and over again. Then all at once he ran away; he was so afraid that the poppies and the child and the beautiful lady would suddenly be gone, because they were all too beautiful to be true, that he wanted rather to be gone himself.

So Peter ran into the house, all aquiver with joy, and he ran against his mother.

"Why, Peter!" she cried. "Where have you been so early? And what makes you so excited?"

Peter laughed: how could she ever guess what he had seen! "The garden!" was all he could say.

"And what did you see in the garden?" asked his mother.

Peter hesitated: should he give away his secret? After all, Peter's mother could simply step out and see all the wonder for herself, if it was truly there.

"Red poppies!" cried Peter, and he was laughing again, laughing that queer laugh, which was really no laughter at all, only joy.

"Why, if they're as fine as that," said Peter's mother, "I must go out right away and look at them myself."

"No, no!" Peter cried and pulled her back by the sleeve. Peter's mother stopped and looked at him in astonishment; and well she might, for Peter hardly knew himself why he would not have her go, except that he wanted the red poppies and the child and the strange lady to be all his own—not even for his mother to see.

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"You're a funny boy!" said Peter's mother. "Now, when you see Grandma, you must be very good, Peter, and you mustn't be wild and ask her to chase you, or anything like that, because she is very old, you know, Peter, and has to sit always in one chair."

"Always in one chair!" mused Peter. "In the chair by the window?"

For he wondered if his grandmother was always looking down on the red poppies, all day, every day.

"Yes, the chair is by the window" said Peter's mother, mildly. "Come, we'll go up before breakfast, and say good-morning. Old Jenny is with her; she has taken care of Grandma for twenty years."

Peter followed his mother up the winding staircase, then through the square place with the spinning-wheel, then along the corridor, past the room where he had slept, on, on, round a corner, and then into a low, white room, where the old, old grandmother sat in a deep armchair by the window. Her face was round and merry; her hair white like the muslin curtains at her window; her eyes very kind and light blue. Behind her stood old Jenny, with gray hair and spectacles.

"And here is my Peter!" said a cheery voice from the chair. "Come to see his old grandma."

Peter had to be kissed, but that was soon over. Then he glanced out of the window, and saw that it did not face the garden at all, only the barnyard, the river, and the woods—the same view that Peter had seen from his own window this morning. Poor Grandma! There she sat by a window all day, and could not look at the red poppies, though they were so near. And yet Peter felt a little relieved—though it was wicked, surely, to be so ungener-

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ous—that his red poppies were still quite his own, that nobody was looking down at them from a window without loving them as he did with all his heart.

“What are you thinking of, Peter?” his grandmother said kindly. “Should you like to live in an old, old house like this, with an old, old grandmother?”

“I’d rather live here than in any other house in the world,” cried Peter, and he meant it.

“Bless his heart!” cried old Jenny, from behind the chair, in a petting voice, and his grandmother cried: “My darling boy!” and Peter had to be kissed again, though he did not know why.

“Why do you like it here best?” asked old Jenny, with a sweetish smile.

“Because of the garden!” cried Peter. He could not say “the red poppies”—only “the garden!”

Then, for some strange reason, Peter’s grandmother and old Jenny burst out laughing, and Peter’s mother shook her head and said reproachfully:

“Why, Peter, I thought you liked this house best of all because Grandma lives here.”

Peter hung his head: what could he say to that?

“I like Grandma all right,” he faltered. “But——”

“But Grandma is old and white,” said the kind grandmother herself. “And the poppies in her garden are red and young—isn’t that it, Peter?”

“Yes, I guess that’s it,” said Peter, nodding solemnly. The poppies were red and young—red and young! There was so much to think about that Peter would like to have run out of doors alone, far, far away, much rather than stay here in the musty room and be stared at by old Jenny, and even this good, wise grandmother.

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"Has your mother told you," the grandmother began, "that you are not the only child in this house today?"

Peter shook his head.

"I thought I would surprise him," said his mother.

"Now, poor lad," said the old Jenny, "he'll think there's a jolly, six-year-old boy to romp with, and it's only a three-year-old little girl."

Peter's heart stood still: the queen of the poppies, the fairy-child, was here in the same house with him, a real child like himself, and the beautiful lady was perhaps her mother!

"You must be nice to little Virginia Grey," said Peter's mother. "She is visiting here with her mother, just as you are with me. They have been living in a warm country across the sea, because the doctor wanted them to, and some time they are going to live in their real home, and that's in our own Gullport, Peter, so that you may see little Virginia often then."

"I've seen them both," said Peter, and he felt that he was growing very red in the face from pride. He knew that his mother and grandmother would be surprised, and they were.

"Where did you see them?" his mother asked, as if she did not quite believe him.

"In the garden," said Peter, and he felt a little sad because his secret was lost.

"Now, go down to breakfast," his grandmother said pleasantly, "and you'll see your friends of the garden again."

Peter's mother stayed to break off a little flower from the heliotrope pot on the window-sill.

"My favorite!" she said, and pinned it to her dress.

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That little, queer, curly heliotrope was his mother's favorite flower: Oh, she had never seen red poppies!

Peter wanted his breakfast because he was hungry, and yet he was a little afraid of following his mother into the dining-room. They walked through two low, dim rooms, with many dark, solemn pictures, and an odd perfume, something like the smell that lingered round some old cashmere shawls that Peter's mother kept in a flowered box in the garret at home. Peter stepped into the dining-room with a fluttering heart.

There she stood at the window, the beautiful lady of the garden, so tall, with such a noble, straight nose and sad gray eyes, so quite like an empress over many lands. And the child beside her seemed smaller now than before among the poppies, a fairy sprite with curls like sunshine and eyes like big, round moons.

The wonderful lady held out her hand to Peter and said in a voice something like a piano when it is played very gently:

"And this is Peter! You and Virginia must be good friends, even though you are so much bigger. Your mother and I went to school together, and we are the best of friends."

To be friends with a fairy! That was something that Peter had not thought of, and could not think of yet. He had never wanted to be friends with a little girl anyway, but this was different; this was like being friends with a bird, or with a poppy from the garden.

"I'll look at her!" said Peter, whereupon the beautiful lady smiled kindly, and Peter's mother laughed aloud.

The fairy-child called Virginia was helped on to a tower of cushions on a chair, across the table from Peter,

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and during breakfast, whenever Peter glanced at her, she began to laugh, and then Peter laughed too. There was much golden honey for breakfast, and blackberries that old Jenny had picked in the woods, and gradually Peter felt more at home and less as if in a dream.

"Now I wonder what Peter would like to do this sunny day," said the beautiful lady, when breakfast was over.

Peter knew what he would like to do: he would like to go back into the garden and just look at the red poppies all day long. Perhaps the fairy-child would come into the garden, too, and stand again among the poppies in the sunshine. And yet what Peter said to the beautiful lady was only:

"I'd like to go to the barnyard and look at the hens." He did not dare to tell his real wish to the lady—he did not know why, except, perhaps, that his mother would look at him queerly. It was all so queer anyway, so very queer, that he should still be seeing the red poppies, although he was not really looking at them with his eyes at all.

"Julie can take Virginia to see the hens, too," said the beautiful lady. "And perhaps they can go for a little walk in the woods, while we stay with Peter's grandmother."

The lady spoke to Peter's mother, who told him then that Julie was Virginia's nurse, and spoke only French, and that Virginia spoke very little English, too. How just like a fairy-child to talk French! Then, besides, it was a delight to Peter that he would not have to talk to Julie, the red-cheeked, black-eyed nurse, who came into the room with a little straw hat for the child, nor to Vir-

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ginia herself, whom he could just look at now without ever saying a word, as if she were in a picture-book.

The beautiful lady kissed the child on her silky hair before Julie put on the little straw hat. Then Peter's mother told him to be good and to go only where Julie went, and waved good-by to them at the house door.

Scarcely had they stepped out when the child, who till now had barely said three words, turned to the nurse and talked very quickly in the strange language, and it sounded as if she were singing an odd, sprightly song. It seemed to Peter that she must be chirping a fairy tongue, the kind that birds understand, and butterflies when they flutter round red poppies.

When they stood leaning against the wire netting round the barnyard to watch the white hens and the black hens and the speckled hens run to and fro, Virginia clapped her hands and made very joyful outcries in that queer, gay language of hers. But Peter could not be so happy over the hens: he did not like the way their tails stuck up in the air, nor the way they wiggled along on their shriveled little feet, nor could he take any fancy to the wrinkles round their eyes. Swans were much nicer than hens—the white, slim-throated swans in the pond at home—and even ducks, specially the wild ducks when they flew over the sea.

All at once Virginia turned away, as if she did not like the hens any more, and chattering very fast to Julie, pointed to the woods across the stream. Then Julie took the child by the hand and they all crossed the little bridge over the gay, sparkling river, where willows were dipping their silvery leaves into the water, then strolled on—the child tripping with tiny steps—into the woods that looked

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so shady and cool. There was a strong smell of pine needles, almost a fragrance of Christmas, though it was August, and the air was drowsy; and there were many little sounds and stirrings in the woods, perhaps of squirrels overhead, or bird's wings, or chipmunks among the fallen leaves. While Julie went to pick blackberries, the child sat down on the moss, and her eyes were wide open in wonder. Peter stood still under a tree and wondered too; it seemed indeed as if something wonderful must happen any moment, as if a hobgoblin should step from behind that big pine tree and make a low bow and say: "At your service, fairy king and queen!" or a squirrel should drop a golden nut and say: "Have this for your Christmas tree, and remember your friends in the woods!" or as if the red poppies of the garden should spring up all at once out of the moss, all in one instant, by magic, and make the whole dark wood gleam with their fiery light.

The red poppies! Peter began to be homesick for them; the woods were so shadowy and sober, and the sunshine only peeped in through holes between the leaves. Julie came back from the bushes and brought the blackberries she had picked, on a big green leaf, and Peter and the fairy-child had a regal feast. But when that was over, and nothing wonderful happened, after all, Peter wished that he were playing in the sunshine, although he did not want to leave the fairy-child, and he did not dare to speak to the nurse for fear that she would look blank and not understand.

"Peter! Peter! Where are you?"

That was a homelike voice, ringing through the quiet of the woods, and Peter's mother stepped through the bushes, briskly, while a lock of her blonde hair was caught

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on a twig. She spoke first to the nurse in the strange language—Peter's own mother in the speech of the fairy queen—and then turned to Peter.

"Grandma wants to see something of Virginia, too," she said. "And while she goes back with Julie and has a little visit with Grandma, you and I can take a walk, Peter, and I'll show you the places where I used to play when I was six."

Peter's mother had promised him this walk for a long, long time, even before he knew that he would really make a visit to his grandmother's so soon; but now that the time for that walk had really come, Peter wished that he might go back with the child, back into the garden, where the red poppies were waiting. But he could not tell his mother that he would rather stay in a garden than walk in the woods and see the places where she had played when she was his age. Besides, he wanted to have seen something to tell his father about, when he should come home from his first journey, and what would his father think of Peter if he had spent the whole day in a garden!

The fairy-child waved good-by, and at the hand of Julie tripped out of the woods. Now Peter tramped briskly beside his mother on the path strewn with brown pine needles beneath the tall pines and fir trees, like Christmas trees without the nuts, and trees with leaves, too—mostly beeches, as his mother said. When they came to a little brook, bubbling over pebbles, Peter's mother said: "There we used to go in wading on hot vacation days;" when they found an aged, giant tree-trunk in their way, she said, cheerfully: "There we used to sit and tell stories about the old man who lived in the tree;" and when they suddenly came upon a clear place, with a few

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birch trees only, she told Peter how they had played tag there and hide-and-seek. Then Peter would look, and Peter would listen, but his heart was not with the brook or the tree-trunk, or the clear place, or his mother's childhood; his heart was with the poppies in the garden. The woods, except for the few clearings, were dark and solemn; the poppies were bright and made his heart laugh. Even when they had stepped out of the woods into the sunlight, and they crossed a big field where his mother said that she used to play ball after school, Peter wondered how far they still were from his grandmother's house. He would not linger in the house at all, but as soon as they had come back he would rush into the garden, while the sun was still at its brightest, so that no minute should be lost without the poppies.

They were walking down the road now toward the broad, white house, with the boxwood hedge leading up to the doorsteps, and the two hydrangea pots on the porch.

"Your shoes are very dusty," said Peter's mother, as she pounded on the door with the shining knocker. "You must brush them off. And I want you to put on your new suit before dinner, anyway. Grandma has dinner at one, you know; so you must hurry."

If Peter had wanted to play in the fields with other boys, he would have begged: "Oh, let me stay out a while!"—but he did not dare to say, "Let me stay in the garden all alone," lest his mother should think him queer, and look at him with a certain startled light in her gray-blue eyes. Peter did not want to be queer, and he knew somehow that it was very queer to be thinking about nothing else all day than bright red poppies. So he meekly put on his new, white suit, and when he was dressed and combed, old

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Jenny called him to dinner, so that a flight to the garden had to be put off again. But at dinner he saw the beautiful lady again, and the fairy-child, and there was something about them that made the red poppies seem very near. The lady and his mother talked much about old times and of how happy life was under ten years of age, till Peter wondered why life was not much happier for his mother now, when she could do what she wanted to every minute, and could tell him what to do besides. But the beautiful lady, who sometimes had a sad light in her gray eyes, Peter thought, might perhaps have been happier when she had looked gay like her fairy-child.

As soon as dinner was over Peter wanted to make a dash for the door that led to the garden, when old Jenny announced:

"Peter, your grandmother would like to see you now. She says she hasn't seen you since before breakfast."

Peter would have protested, begging that he might put off this call on his grandmother for yet a little while, had not the beautiful lady looked straight at him with her clear gray eyes, so that he could not say a word. And Peter had to talk with his grandmother by the window with the heliotrope pots, pleasantly and politely, like a good grandson, as if he were not longing wildly for the red poppies in the garden. But the moment came when old Jenny had sent Peter downstairs, because his grandmother needed her nap, when the fairy-child was already sleeping in her room, under the care of Julie, when Peter's mother and the beautiful lady had withdrawn into the cool, dim sitting-room, to escape the heat outside—and Peter was free.

Peter was free to fly out and face the poppies again.

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But he lingered by the door, suddenly shy. If they should be gone, if a wind should have blown all the red poppy leaves away! Tears came into Peter's eyes, and his hand trembled on the doorknob. If, perhaps, he had not seen them at all, because it had been so early in the morning—perhaps he had not been awake!

Peter opened the door and skipped down into the garden; there they were, all the many, many poppies, glowing like one blood-red fire. Peter's heart beat very fast, and he was laughing again; he was laughing in his heart. He was laughing because the red poppies were true, because they were as good as fairyland and yet were true; he was laughing because the poppies were red; he was laughing because a mild wind was passing over them this minute, and making them sway lightly, and the red flower leaves flutter; he was laughing because the poppies were all his own, because they were there for Peter's own eyes to see——

He wanted to sing, to call out, to tell someone of his joy, but he could only whisper:

“Red poppies! Red poppies!”

CHAPTER II

THE PARSONAGE AND MIRA MARE

THERE was always something solemn at home in Gullport about the hour between church and Sunday dinner. Peter's father would seem still to be thinking of his sermon, as if he had to give it over again, and his mother would look as if she were still singing hymns. Then it sometimes happened that Peter's father would preach a second sermon at home—a special sermon for little boys of eight—with the jam-pots instead of the flesh-pots of Egypt, in language much less grand than the grown-up sermon, which was hard to understand but beautiful to hear.

It was on account of such a simplified sermon which might come that Peter lingered in the yard and watched the yellow leaves spin round in the wind, very bright yellow against a sunny blue sky, and then he thought of the wonderful light that a sunbeam had made playing on the sea-green stained glass in church this morning, a light that had made him think of many happy things, such as a Christmas tree, or a lovely sea-shell, or a humming bird on a bush. The Sanborns, who lived in the stately white house across the road, were coming home now—they must have taken a walk after church—and a gloomy couple they looked, both very long and thin and dark, with sol-

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emn faces, as if they had never laughed at something funny in all their lives. No wonder that was, either; they lived all alone in that big, solemn house, and there were no children to play in the yard under the jolly apple trees. There was no little boy in sight anywhere at this hushed hour; all were at home, very grown-up and good, just as Peter was in his best Sunday suit. But after dinner he would put his play-clothes on again and whistle before Dick Taylor's window and run to the beach with him to play. Peter wondered what the gentleman would be like, who was coming all the way from Boston to have dinner with them today, and would ride back again tonight. Peter had heard his father say that this gentleman was still very young, but that he was a genius. A genius! Peter wondered what that could mean. He would go in and ask.

When Peter came into his father's study, he saw his father and mother both look very thoughtful, as if they had been talking about something uncommon. His father was stretched out in his easy chair with an open book in his hands, which he did not read, and his mother was leaning on the window-sill, looking out over the road.

"You look so awfully solemn!" said Peter, glad to hear his own voice in the hush of the study. "What have you been talking about?"

Peter's mother looked at him in a queer way, and his father said in a low voice:

"We were talking about what we hope you will be when you are grown up."

Peter wished he had stayed in the garden; he had forgotten the question he meant to ask, and he had a horror of solemn talk.

THE PARSONAGE AND MIRA MARE

"Peter," his father began, slowly, "did you understand the first lesson I read in church today?"

Oh, the sermon for eight-year-olds was beginning, and Peter even more heartily wished himself back in the yard. He tried to think what forbidden deed he had done this last week, but his mind was blank. As for the text of this morning's lesson—he must have been looking at the sunlight on the glass window just at the time it was read!

"Your mother was just reminding me," Peter's father went on, "that I read the same lesson when you were a little baby a month old. It is the story of little Samuel that I read, the Samuel who grew up to be a great prophet. His mother was so happy over her little boy that she brought him into the Temple and swore, 'I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life.' Now, your mother heard me read this story in church when you were only a month old, and she thought of her little boy, and she promised then and there that she would give her son unto the Lord all the days of his life."

This was not a sermon for an eight-year-old! No, this was grown-up, and made Peter feel solemn and aged. He glanced at his mother, who was still gazing out of the window, as if she did not want to look into his eyes, and was absently passing her hand over his head. There was a sober stillness in the room, as if they were waiting for organ music to begin.

"What shall I do for the Lord all the days of my life?" asked Peter in confusion.

"That is what you must find out as you grow up," said Peter's father. "That is what you are going to school for, and when you are grown up, to college. And perhaps you

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will be a minister like your father, but perhaps you will find other ways . . .”

There was much to think of here for Peter's head—Peter's little head that was crammed with jolly thoughts of apple trees and golden-rod and starfish, with scant room for sober ideas. He had sometimes wished that his father and mother did not care so much about him, that they would let him run loose into the woods, like red-haired Mike's mother, who never knew where her boy played all day long. But today all this about Samuel made him rather proud.

Peter did not like to think of the time when he should be grown up; why should he? Grown-up people were always sitting at windows when children were playing in the grass; grown-up people were always saying: “I haven't got the time,” when children had all day to romp in—at least in vacation and on Saturdays. To be sure, grown-up people could stay up as late as they wanted, but, after all, they usually stayed up to write letters or read big, heavy books. No, it would be much better never to grow up at all. Now, there was Dick, who couldn't wait for the time when he could be a sailor and sail over the sea all the year round. Peter wondered if he would like to be a sailor too. It would be fine, surely, to stand in the wind and look out over the wide, wide blue! But the sea would not always be blue; sometimes it would look cold and gray, and there would be nothing to see far and wide but gray sky and gray sea, and perhaps a few gulls flying. No, Peter would not be a sailor. And, besides, how could he serve the Lord far away on a ship? But there was no other way, either, except the way of Peter's father, and Peter could not think of himself as standing solemnly in

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a pulpit, no, not fifty years from this day. Perhaps, after all, there was some other way.

The doorbell rang. Peter's mother started up with a fluttered air, and Peter's father stood rubbing his hands. There was a wave of excitement in the air, something like the hush before a sermon.

Lizzy came and announced Mr. Atherton.

"Show him in here, please," said Peter's mother, in little more than a whisper.

Mr. Atherton came in, and Peter had never seen anyone like Mr. Atherton. No doubt Peter's father and mother had never seen anyone like Mr. Atherton, either, and that was why they had seemed rather excited. It was not because he was so very handsome, and his eyes were so black and gleaming with light that you would not dare to look straight into them; it was not because of his gay voice and musical, light way of laughing that Peter felt almost giddy since Mr. Atherton had come into the sober room; it was because this stranger seemed to have come from a far-away land, some dreamland, perhaps, in a phantom ship! Perhaps his home was on an island with palm trees, where flowers grew all the year round, like the island in "The Pirate's Paradise," that Dick had lent Peter.

Mr. Atherton, after he had shaken hands with father and mother, and Peter too, sat down in the chair that really belonged to Peter's father, where, usually, no one else dared to sit, and Peter's father and mother fixed their eyes on him and listened hard. Peter did not know what the stranger was talking about; he used words that Peter had never heard, and it seemed to him that Mr. Atherton had some secret ways of talking that only a few

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chosen people, like Peter's father and mother, for instance, could follow in a magic way—like the man in the fairy tale, who said: "Open Sesame!" to the miraculous mountain that understood.

"Dinner is served!" announced Lizzy.

Peter had quite forgotten that the moment of the Sunday ice-cream's arrival was near at hand, so strong had been the spell of this newcomer. And now he would sit opposite the prince-like stranger all through the dinner hour! With a timid little voice, Peter's mother asked Mr. Atherton to follow into the dining-room. There Peter sat really face to face with the magical stranger and as he looked up, his eyes met the bright, dazzling glance of Mr. Atherton. The stranger smiled at him very kindly and Peter felt bewitched.

"Little boy," said Mr. Atherton, "tell me what you like best in all the world, beside your father and mother?"

Oh, what a story-book question to ask, and how Peter would have loved to give a bright, quick answer! But there was nothing in his poor, silly head, and Mr. Atherton's eyes were sparkling at him mischievously, and Peter felt his cheeks grow very red.

"I—I don't know," he stammered. "Perhaps I know, but I don't think I can tell just now."

"Peter will think about it for the rest of the day," said his father, to help him out.

"When I was your age," the stranger went on, "I loved a swan best of everything in the world—a swan on a sluggish stream that flowed by our garden."

"A swan!" Peter echoed, dreamily. "A swan as white as snow?"

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"Yes," said the stranger, "white as snow, with the most graceful, winding neck and a wicked beak."

"I love swans, too," said Peter. "There are some in our town on the pond; but I don't think I like them best of everything in the world."

And as Peter mused over the black-eyed visitor and the snow-white swan, his thoughts drifted away, and when they landed in the dining-room again, after a voyage down silvery streams on the back of a docile white swan, the conversation was once more a tangle of grown-up topics in which little Peter could not find his way. But now that there was nothing for him to hear, his eyes were all the busier, jumping from Mr. Atherton to Peter's mother, then to his father and back again to the absorbing stranger. There was a big roast on the table, but Peter's father, deep in talk, seemed to forget to carve, holding the carving-knife and fork in air, and making some aimless movements toward the patient roast, until Peter's mother caught his eye with a nervous glance. Then Peter looked slyly at Lizzie to see how she was taking these unusual happenings, but Lizzy, though her face looked long-suffering and a little sarcastic, was calm enough in the presence of the rare Mr. Atherton. The stranger spoke kindly, and there was really nothing about him to make one afraid, although, to be sure, when the ice-cream came, Peter did not dare to look too happy, lest Mr. Atherton should think him a baby.

When they had all risen and followed Peter's mother back into the library, Peter, who usually said good-by at the threshold on similar occasions, lingered in the room and watched the grown-up people drink their bitter coffee.

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"You had better go out and play," said his mother, in a low voice.

"Yes, I'm going to the beach with Dick and Harold," Peter replied, but stayed rooted to the floor. After all, Dick and Harold he could see every day, but who knew when Mr. Atherton would come again!

Mr. Atherton was looking at a big book with Peter's father, who was pointing at a special place in it, and seemed very serious. But when the book was laid aside, the guest turned to Peter's mother and asked her in a gay voice:

"Do you know my old friend, Mrs. Montague?"

Mrs. Montague! That was Harold's mother, and Peter was going to play on the beach beneath her house.

"I am going to play with Harold Montague right off, now," cried the excited Peter.

"Then we may meet again," said Mr. Atherton, politely, as if Peter were a grown-up gentleman. "I am going to call at—Mira Mare, I believe the house is called, later on."

"Run along, Peter!" urged his mother, rather worriedly, as if she were afraid that her silly little boy was taking too much of the stranger's precious time.

But Peter was inspired with a sudden bold curiosity.

"I want to ask Mr. Atherton a question," he said, flushing with excitement, while his mother's mild gray-blue eyes looked somewhat shocked and alarmed.

"I'll answer it, if I can," said Mr. Atherton, with that same beautiful politeness.

"What is a genius?" Peter burst out.

Then Peter's father, though he was the Reverend Mr. Loring, and in a solemn mood today, laughed loudly.

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"Well," said Mr. Atherton, with a jolly twitch of his moustache and a brilliant light in his eyes: "Do you know the story of the Ugly Little Duckling?"

"Yes, I know that," said Peter, proud that he did not have to say no.

"Well, a genius," explained Mr. Atherton, "is an ugly little duckling that is sure to turn into a swan."

"A swan!" cried Peter. "A swan again!"

"That will give you something to think about for the rest of the day," said Peter's father, meaning that Peter was dismissed, and as his mother's eyes grew more entreating, Peter said good-by reluctantly, though there was now still a hope of meeting Mr. Atherton again in the afternoon.

Then he rushed upstairs to put on his play-clothes, and with his Sunday suit Peter dropped all his solemnity, too, and the sense of awe and wonder inspired by the stranger in the house. The sunshine was beckoning at the window, and Peter ran out and skipped down the road till he came to the little white house where Dick lived, and there he banged with the knocker on the door.

"Dick couldn't wait," said Dick's jolly, round-faced mother. "He's gone to Harold's, and said you should find them on the beach."

Off Peter skipped again, and walked briskly through the quiet town, where the houses seemed as if they were taking naps, and only once in a while some friend of his father's would pass by in a tall silk hat. Peter came to the road that ran along a marshy arm of the sea, then walked over the causeway to Green Shore, where the summer cottagers lived. Because it was late in September many of the houses were deserted, and only an old

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fisherman was sauntering down the road. All the wilder the shaggy barberry bushes looked in the solitude, as the north wind blew on them roughly, above the sharp gray rocks. The sea was Peter's favorite deep blue today, and the sunshine made the ripples golden, and the town across the marshy arm of the sea looked white and cheerful, like a toy town. There were some sails far out at sea, and two tall masts were towering above the trees that hid the harbor of the town from Peter's view. Happy, happy the boy who could play on the beach on such a day! Peter jumped high into the air from joy, and ran against the wind to Mira Mare, the house of Harold Montague's mother. The house really deserved such a fanciful foreign name, which, as Harold had told him, meant "Look at the Sea!" because it was something like a castle built high on a rock, very white in the sunlight, with a great, high veranda. Harold's mother was on the piazza with another lady, but Peter did not want her to see him, because it was silly to waste good sunshine on polite talk with ladies, when one might be playing on the beach; and, too, because he was just a little afraid of Harold's mother.

So Peter flew down the stairs that were cut in the rocks beneath Mira Mare down to the long beach, where Dick and Harold stopped playing ball when they saw him coming. Then they all took off their shoes and stockings to explore among the rocks.

To feel the ice-cold water creeping over one's bare feet, to skip from one low rock to another, playing hide-and-seek with the water; to slide on the slippery, leathery seaweed; to lean against the pointed barnacles of a tall rock while the wind was piping in one's ear—that was life indeed to

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Peter! He and Dick had looked for starfish many, many times, but each time the quest was a novel adventure. In the first place, the tide was quite surprisingly low at this hour today, so that some little rocks emerged into the sunlight that usually stayed tucked in their watery bed; then there was a big horseshoe crab, a rare guest, swimming away in the pool between the great cliff and the cluster of rocks on the beach, as gaily as if he swam there every day of his life. Peter and Dick crawled on over seaweed and barnacles, slipping into the cold water, so that it splashed, dodging sharp-clawed crabs that lurked among the pebbles like sly thieves, capturing the meek, curling starfish on their way—till they came to their favorite nook, that could be reached only at the lowest tide, the deep, secret pool beneath the greatest of the boulders. Peter and Dick knelt each on a cold, wet stone and looked down into the pool; a wonderful land was there, a fairy land of the ocean! Sea anemones grew on the side of the rock, open like real flowers in bloom, and the white periwinkles and limpets gleamed like gems; the rock bottom of the clear, still pool shone red and green, and little green crabs were gliding over it swiftly; purple-gray starfish lay quite still beside glistening bits of silvery mother-of-pearl. All at once, into the smooth peaceful pool a little fish glided like a black shadow, and out again. Peter watched, enchanted; this must be the cool, shining home of the young mermaid with glistening scales and seaweed hair, where she sang to her little fishes at dusk, when no boys could spy upon her, and she made ripples in the water with a mother-of-pearl fan. Perhaps, some night, she would leave a pearl in a crevice there with the shells and Peter would find it.

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"Say, I've got a sand-dollar!" Harold's voice startled Peter out of his reverie.

There was Harold, working his way toward them, clutching the long, brown streamers of seaweed, and with the other hand guarding his precious sand-dollar.

"You never found a sand-dollar in your life!" he boasted, when he had reached them, as he held out the flat, gray disk on his hand.

"Oh, I found one last night," said Dick mischievously. "And that didn't have a chip off at the edge, either, like this one."

"You did not find one. Anyway, I bet you didn't find one as good as this," cried Harold, in a temper. In his excitement he stamped his bare foot on the seaweed, slipped, and as he grasped hold of the nearest rock for support, dropped the precious sand-dollar into the pool. Peter laughed heartily: now the mermaid would find a pretty gray sand-dollar when she slipped into her pool tonight!

"You can laugh," sulked Harold. "I'm going home!" And he crept away.

"Isn't he silly?" said Peter to Dick.

"I should say so," said Dick to Peter. "Let him go home. The water's getting mighty cold, though. Let's catch our starfish and go back, too."

The water was icy, indeed, in the puddles between the rocks, and even the stones began to feel very cold to bare feet. Besides, the wind was growing rougher and whipping up little white-capped waves, not at all like the calm pools beneath the sheltering boulders. So Peter and Dick, when each had tied a party of wiggling starfish into his handkerchief, wound their way back to the beach, and

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after running about in the warm sand to dry their feet, put on again their sober shoes and stockings. Harold, who had been lacing his shoes when they came, turned round at the foot of the steps in the rocks, and said sulkily:

"Mamma wants you two to come up on the piazza!" Then he climbed up the steps.

Peter made a wry face, and Dick pouted.

"What does she want us for?" said Peter. "I don't like her, do you?"

Dick shook his head.

"Perhaps she's got some candy, though," he said, with a sudden skip, whereupon they both sauntered up the steps.

The wind was now roaring about Mira Mare and made it seem more than ever like a castle by the sea. With his heart fluttering a little, as it always did before he talked to Harold's proud, gorgeous mother, Peter walked ahead of Dick up the steep stairway that led to the high veranda.

"Here they are!" cried Harold's voice at the top of the stairs. His sulkiness had blown away, and he stood grinning at the side of no one less than Mr. Atherton.

"Ah, my young friend," the genius said, in his polite way, "you have had some conversation with the sea-wind, to judge by your cheeks."

Conversation with the wind! That wasn't the way the people whom Peter knew talked, but he liked it and said:

"Yes, and it was loud, too."

"We've been running on the beach," said Dick, who was never afraid of anybody, not even the rare Mr. Atherton, and with the big, blue eyes in his round, ruddy face

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looked merrily up at the stranger. "And then we looked for starfish."

Dick untied his handkerchief and showed the heap of poor, limp starfish to Mr. Atherton, who made a face as if he did not like them very well.

"They look rather out of their element," he said.

"I don't know what you mean," said Dick—and no wonder, for Peter himself did not understand.

"I mean," explained Mr. Atherton, "that they look as if they would be much happier in the water."

"I guess they would be," said Dick. "Perhaps I'll take them back on my way home."

—"Ah, here are the children!" That was Mrs. Montague's high, cold voice, and Harold's mother swept over to them in her grand, startling way, and behind followed Harold's heavy father, with a face something like a bulldog's, who never said more than three words, so that people seemed to forget all about him. Peter always felt a chill when Mrs. Montague came near him, even though the ladies that called on his mother called her a great beauty. She had fishy green eyes, like Harold's, and a very fair skin and smooth, brown hair like his, and today she wore a dress that was glistening sea-green, and there were sparkling gems at her ears and her wrists, and everything about her seemed to sparkle. Besides, she brought candy in a silver dish—Peter's favorite kind, too, with cherries—for him and for Dick, and that made the proud lady seem kinder.

"I called you, Peter," she said, in her chilly voice "because there is a lady here, a friend of your mother's, who wants to see you again."

Peter was excited enough to see Mr. Atherton again,

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and now Mrs. Montague had another friend of his mother's in store for him, and one who really wanted to see Peter. Who could that be—and a lady, too!

In the next moment Peter stood before the beautiful lady of his grandmother's garden.

"Do you remember me?" she said, in her voice like low music, as she bent down to him and took Peter's hand. Did he remember her! For a moment he was in the garden again, his grandmother's garden, ablaze with blood-red poppies, and he saw the fairy-child with the sunlit curls and the queenly lady with her clear, sea-gray eyes by the garden wall—and the moment afterwards he saw only the poppies, one glowing, laughing red.

"What are you thinking of, Peter?" Harold's mother asked, with a laugh that chased Peter's vision away.

"I don't know," said Peter, stupidly. How could he tell the truth to Harold's mother: she did not make him think of red poppies at all—she made him think of something snaky and green.

But the beautiful lady of the poppies said: "I believe he was thinking of his grandmother's garden."

"Yes, I was," said Peter, and he was happy again.

"Virginia and I have come to live in Gullport," the beautiful lady went on. "And I hope you and she will play together often, and Dick, too," she added, like a Queen who was kind to everyone.

And Peter wanted to laugh because he was so joyful, and to hop and skip—if only Mrs. Montague had not been staring at him with her cold green eyes. But he did laugh, after all.

"You have some secret," said Mr. Atherton. "Let us laugh, too, Peter!"

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"It's only—" Peter began slowly, and then cried out suddenly, as if an idea had just shot into his mind: "I can tell you now what I like best in all the world—outside of my father and mother."

"What is it?" asked Mr. Atherton, with a curious smile. And Peter said: "Red poppies!"

CHAPTER III

THE BIRTHDAY WISH

THE sun was just going to set, the great golden-red fireball, between the long fleecy rows of deep red clouds; the sky was a sea of crimson that turned purple at the horizon.

"Play ball!"

Peter was on the field playing "scrub" with the other boys, and it was his turn to bat.

There was a magic light in the air that made the trees and the grass seem greener than by day.

"Strike one!"

The sun had begun to dip beneath the lower cloud, and it was almost blood-red now; and there was orange in the sky, a bright, glowing orange——

"Strike two!"

Oh, Peter must not look at the sky any more: he had only one more chance to hit the ball. Just a glance, though, while the catcher picked up the ball and threw it to Ted, the pitcher.

The sun was almost down, only a tiny slice, like a little flame gleamed above the cloud that was now purple-blue. And spread out beneath the cloud there was a film of lovely rose-light——

"Strike three——out!"

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Peter started: he did not know that he had struck at all!

"You didn't even look at the ball!" jeered Red Mike from first base. "You was lookin' at the sky!"

Peter made a sheepish face as he dropped the bat and slouched meekly out to the field. A peal of laughter burst on his ears.

"Peter, Peter,
Pumpkin-eater!"

Thus sang all the boys and made a great hullabaloo till Peter wished the ground would open and swallow him. Well, he wouldn't even glance at the clouds with the corner of his eye while the game was going on, and the next time his turn to the bat came he would knock the ball over the roof of the house behind the field.

"Gee. There's a dandy!"

Joe Nutter had hit a fly—way up high it flew, like a bird. Peter rushed forward, then ran backwards a few little steps—and the ball was in his hand.

"Good work! Good for you, Peter!" the boys shouted round him. These were pleasant words to his ears, and the sunset was avenged.

Joe Nutter, nicknamed "Noodles," tramped heavily up to the field.

"Hello, Noodles!" cried Peter. "Come on, you be shortstop and I'll get the flies . . ."

"Oh, nothing doing!" Noodles replied. "Tim's at the bat. He hits more fouls—hello, what's up?"

"Tim's going home to dinner." "It's getting too dark to play, anyway!" "My people had their supper long ago!" Thus shouted the general breaking up, and Peter remem-

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bered that his mother had told him especially to come home on time tonight.

So Peter walked home with Dick in the fragrant May night. They met many passers-by: fishermen coming home from their boats and townspeople returning from picnics or just strolling up and down in front of their houses to taste the fine air. Everywhere they saw the windows wide open, and in almost every house someone was leaning out of a window; and all along their way the lovely scent of late lilacs rose from the gardens. Dick and Peter never said a word, so tired were they both from playing, and lulled into a happy drowsiness.

Sleepy as he was, Peter went to bed very early, glad that he had done the hated arithmetic lesson before he had gone out to play ball—done it in a way, though he knew that it was the wrong way. And he coaxed Lizzy to call him at six in the morning and give him breakfast while his father and mother were still asleep, because he wanted to carry out a long-cherished plan of taking a long walk in the woods before school. So with eager thoughts of the morning he fell into a deep sleep.

A loud knock at the door! What, was it time to get up so soon, when dreams were still so enchanting? Peter rubbed his eyes. Oh, this was the morning of his adventure, of his secret flight into the woods! No more dreams now, but swift dressing and a rush for the kitchen, where Lizzy in a cheerful mood gave him milk and cereal, and put an orange into his pocket.

Away now, away into the green, waking world! The horrid black bag with the arithmetic book and his notebooks in it he would have liked to leave at home, but, unhappily, there was school at the end of his morning's

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journey. Peter's heart leaped with joy as he slipped out of the back door: the sunshine was all his own in this early morning hour, and the robins were singing for him alone. There was a big, stout robin on the grass now, wetting his feet with the dew, for pearls of dew were twinkling here and there. The lilac bushes were moist and cool and fragrant when Peter buried his face in their blossoms, and the blooming apple tree was like one giant flower. But as there was no time to linger in the yard, Peter walked briskly through the quiet streets, skipping now and then from joy at nearing the woods.

"Hallo, sir; up pretty early today!" That was the milkman's greeting from his cart.

"Yes, I'm going into the woods," said Peter, and skipped along.

The woods were not very far, not much farther than the schoolhouse, which was at the outskirts of the town, and Peter had roamed and played in them often—but never in this early morning hour. After all, it was nothing so wonderful to take a walk in the woods before school, and yet Peter felt a thrill as he entered them, as if he were setting out on some great adventure and expected something marvelous to happen. He walked along the path with light green beeches on either side and silvery birch trees, and now and then a big pine or hemlock tree. The ground was moist and from it rose a spicy smell of roots and leaves and all the good things of the wood. Peter turned aside into a narrow path that led into the denser parts, where cedar trees grew and more pines and where the underbrush was thick. There was a clearing somewhere in this direction with a view of the sea.

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There it was—but, Oh, someone else had found it before him! Who could that man be—what was he doing there, standing in front of a two-legged, wooden stand, holding a big, flat piece of wood in his hand, like an oval wooden plate! The woods had opened and behind the trees the sea gleamed a wonderful deep blue and the sunlight threw golden spots on the ground. Peter rejoiced that he was here, with his eyes open, and not in bed. But what had brought that strange man here, too, and what could he be doing, standing stiffly in front of that wooden stand, moving only his arm? Could it be some one taking pictures with a camera? But that would not take him so long a time in one place. Peter must go nearer and see.

On the queer wooden thing stood a picture, indeed, but not a camera picture—a painted picture, like those in Mrs. Montague's house, and the man was painting on it with a long, flat brush. There on the picture were the black trees and the gleaming blue sea behind them, and the golden sunspots on the rich, dark ground—all beautiful; as good as the real trees, the real sun, the real sea! Peter stood enchanted behind the strange man, very quietly, so that he could watch unnoticed. On the flat, wooden plate, which had a hole on one end for the painter's thumb, were little pools of color—red, green, yellow, blue, brown, and some purplish, some a queer old rose, some muddy gray, and one great snaky mass of white; and the man dipped his brush first into one pool of color, then into another, and made alluring mixtures on the plate. Then he would whip the picture with his brush and make delicate changes of color on the sunspots upon the ground. Peter had never seen anyone paint before. He had

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a tiny paint-box himself, but there were only red and blue and yellow in it, and he had colored pictures in picture-books, and had even made little drawings of his own that he had colored afterwards—but all that was very different from making the sea and the woods and the sunlight over again with a big brush.

The painter turned round and looked at Peter with sharp, bright blue eyes, like a fisherman's; his face looked ruddy and rough, with a wild grizzly moustache, and the hair under his slouch hat was shaggy and gray. What an adventure, to be in the woods alone in the early morning and meet a man who looked like a pirate and had the touch of a wizard!

"Well, boy, d'you know what you see in this picture here?" he asked, in a gruff voice.

"I guess I know, all right," cried Peter, highly honored to be addressed. "I never saw anything so wonderful. I wish I could do something like that."

"Why don't you learn?" said the wizard, dipping his brush into a little can of muddy green fluid that was attacked to the wooden plate.

"Learn!" cried Peter, excited. "Can one learn to do that?"

"One can't learn to paint well," said the strange man. "But one can learn to paint somehow."

"But can a boy learn to make a picture like that one?" asked Peter, impatiently.

"That depends," said the painter, squinting at the trees through a round hole made with two fingers. "It depends on whether you've got it in you."

Peter felt his cheeks grow red and heard his heart beat.

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"D'you suppose," he cried, "that I've got it in me?"

The busy stranger stopped an instant to look at Peter more kindly than before.

"Perhaps you have," he said. "You can't tell till you try. I've got a boy that could paint quite decent when he was ten."

"Ten!" cried Peter, in a rush of jealousy. "Why, I'm most ten now. Why can't I do the same?"

"Perhaps you never tried," said the painter, not in the least excited, and stroked the sea on his picture with a flat, shining knife.

"I haven't got a paint-box like that," said Peter, wistfully.

"My boy didn't have, either," the stranger replied. "He had water colors at your age, and when he wanted to paint oil, he used my old tubes."

"But my paint-box has only red and blue and yellow—and black," Peter complained. "And it's only meant for coloring picture-books, and Dick—that's a friend of mine—said I was too old to play with a paint-box like that."

"Perhaps your folks will give you another one," the stranger suggested, and that idea set Peter's soul on fire. His birthday came in June, and what was a birthday for, but to have one's dearest wish fulfilled? If only his father and mother would understand how much he really wanted a new paint-box!

"How old was your boy," he asked, anxiously, "when he painted the very first time?"

"Seven, I guess," the painter answered absently. "Or eight." These careless words stung Peter to the depth of his heart; a jealous pang almost drove tears into his eyes.

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"What made him try so young?" he asked. "No boys I know paint at all."

"He saw his dad do it all the time," said the painter. "So he wanted to try, too."

"My father and mother never paint," Peter complained. "They never think about it at all."

To that the painter made no reply, and Peter watched him a few minutes in silence, as the sea grew brighter under his brush.

"Where's your boy now?" Peter asked, thinking that the son of this gruff wizard of the woods might make a good playfellow, even though he was jealous of one so far ahead.

"He's in Boston, at school," the painter replied.

"Oh, why doesn't he go to school here?" asked Peter, astonished.

"Because there is no art school here," the painter answered, in a tone as if he meant to say: "What a foolish question!"

"Art school," Peter repeated, lingeringly, as if there were a mystery in those words. His father, now and then in a sermon, had spoken of "art and music" always together, as if these two were sisters, and his mother had called the pictures in Mrs. Montague's house "works of art." But an art school . . .

"Is an art school a place where you learn to paint?" he asked, timidly.

"That's what it is," the painter answered. "To draw and to paint and to model—anything along that line."

"I'd like to go to art school!" said Peter wistfully.

"Should you?" said the strange man, absently, for he

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was now scraping off a white cloud from the sky and putting on more blue, very quickly and deftly.

There was truly a glorious light now that made the sea gleam with dazzling gold. Peter was very happy here alone with this strange man of the woods, who was catching the sunshine and the gleam of the sea for his picture. There was no sound but the rustle of leaves and the muffled murmur of the tide.

All at once, breaking through the silence, bells rang clear and loud and brisk.

"Oh, dear!" cried Peter, waking out of his reverie, "That's the nine o'clock bell! I'm late for school."

"You'd better run!" said the painter, calmly.

"I don't care if I am late," Peter declared. "I'd rather stay here."

"You can come again," said the strange man gruffly, without looking up from his work.

"Oh, how fine!" cried Peter, jumping from joy. "Are you going to be here tomorrow?"

"I guess so," the painter mumbled. "If the light's the same."

"Then I'll come," said Peter. "Good-by."

Reluctantly Peter tore himself away and strolled off to school. It was so late already that a few minutes more or less would make no difference, and besides, the more he missed of the arithmetic lesson, the better.

The hall of the schoolhouse was hushed, and from behind closed doors came the sounds of reciting voices. When Peter, with a grand air of indifference, walked into the room of his grade, all the boys and girls looked up, and some laughed and nudged each other, and some winked at him saucily.

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Miss Rose Bangs, the teacher, stopped short in her demonstration at the blackboard and faced Peter with an impatient frown.

"Peter Loring," she said, sternly, "this is the third time you've been late this week. I want you to stay after school. I want to speak to you."

What did Peter care! He would speak to Miss Bangs ten times after school for one early morning hour with the strange man in the woods.

"Yes, Miss Bangs, here's my lesson," he said, calmly, pulling his papers out of the little green bag, and laid them on the desk.

The children were staring at Peter with admiration as he took his seat, while Miss Bangs turned back to the blackboard. It seemed that the class was engaged in a long, complicated division, and Peter did not know what the teacher was talking about. Miss Bangs looked very funny, bobbing her head up and down in her excitement over the stupid division, and appearing shocked when somebody made a mistake. Her nose had such a funny point, and her chin was queer and pointed, too, and her yellow curls seemed very comical today. Peter pulled a sheet of paper and a pencil out of his bag and began to draw: there was Miss Bangs now, on the paper, her nose much longer and more pointed, her chin queerer, and her curls wilder than those of the real Miss Bangs—a "caricature," as Harold had called pictures in newspapers that made people look funnier than they really were. Peter had to laugh at his own drawing, as he wrote "Miss Rose Bangs" beneath it in flourishing letters. Whom could he draw now? He looked about—Oh, there was Mike, with his red hair sticking up like

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quills on a porcupine and his nose tilting upward. A few strokes, and there was Red Mike, too, beside Miss Bangs, alive and funny, except that the carrot color of his hair was lacking to make the picture complete.

"Peter Loring, what will you do with the remainder?" Miss Bangs's thin voice piped from the blackboard.

Peter started.

"I don't know," he said, sheepishly.

"What have you been writing there?" Miss Bangs asked, severely.

"I haven't been writing," said Peter. "I've been drawing pictures."

Thereupon a burst of laughter from the whole class greeted Peter, and Ted Raffles beside him snatched the paper with the wicked drawing from Peter's desk, and chuckling gave it to the boy in front of him, and so it was passed on, among the loud laughter of the boys and the choked giggling of the girls. Peter was lost, but he didn't care. Somehow, he didn't care what happened to him after his beautiful adventure of the morning, because everything else seemed so much smaller, of less importance. But when Miss Bangs was coming dangerously near the desk that her mischievous portrait had reached by this time, Peter began to tremble, not for his own fate, but for poor Miss Bangs. If she should see her nose—and her chin! Any other day he would have relished the excitement of such a scene, but today, when he himself was so happy from that magic sunny hour in the woods, he wanted everyone else to rejoice too—even Miss Bangs. So when with a glance he saw that the paper had now landed in the hands of Dick, he cried in a frantic stage-whisper:

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"Tear it up, Dick! Tear it up!"

Dick turned round sharply, caught Peter's eye, and in a twinkling had torn the harmful paper into shreds, just before Miss Bangs had come to snatch it.

Peter gave a sigh of relief. In his excitement he had risen from his chair, and now he sank back in placid content, for Miss Bangs had not seen her nose.

"Peter Loring," the rescued victim said, never guessing what she had escaped, "by your mischief you have made the whole class unruly today. I can't have that go on. Now you go to the blackboard immediately!"

The blackboard! Peter slouched up to it as slowly as possible, and dropped his piece of chalk, but these delays were of small use. When he held the chalk firmly at last, his hand ached to draw another portrait of Miss Bangs, a big one on the blackboard, to the cheers of the class, but he refrained and toiled wearily through the long dry division. He had just lost his way in a sickening wilderness of numbers when the bell rang with its welcome clang.

The next hour was English, and that was really pleasant, after the arithmetic, as they were reading "The Wonderbook," and had just began the strange story of "Pandora and Her Marvelous Box." After English and recess came geography, in which Peter had to tell Miss Bangs what the boundaries of Europe were, and as he forgot only one sea at the bottom, that was not so bad, either.

And now the time had come for a moral talk from Miss Bangs. Peter let all the children leave the schoolroom, even Dick, to whom he whispered laughingly once more, as he had done in recess: "You saved my life, Dick." Then he walked up to the desk with a light heart, for he

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could not be downcast today, and with mischievous eyes looked at Miss Bangs, who stood before him, sober and severe.

"Now no fooling," she said sharply. "You know you were very naughty in arithmetic today."

"I know," said Peter, and his eyes twinkled as he thought of Miss Bangs's portrait. "But I hate arithmetic and I love to draw pictures."

"That's all the more reason," said Miss Bangs, grandly, "why you should try hard to do arithmetic."

"I suppose so," Peter replied, and then he remembered something that his father had once said in the pulpit, which he repeated now with a noble sigh: "But we all have our faults."

Peter did not understand why Miss Bangs, who had tried to be so very serious all the time while he felt gay, should now break out into a sudden funny little laugh, just at the point when he was beginning to be sober.

"Well, try to mend yours, anyway," Miss Bangs said quickly, without looking at him, and began to pack her bag. When Peter stayed and waited, she looked up hastily, and said:

"That'll do. Good-by."

When Peter came home, he found that his mother had been anxious because he had flown away secretly so early in the morning, and her tone was reproachful. But when Peter told her about the strange man in the woods, she smiled:

"Has he got a rough, straggly moustache and gray hair?" she asked.

"Yes, that's just the way he looks!" cried Peter, skipping with excitement. "Do you know him?"

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"Why, that's Mr. Woodfin," she replied. "Of course I know him."

The idea of his mother's knowing the wizard of the wood! Peter was almost disappointed at being robbed of his mystery, but on the other hand, he now had a chance to inquire about the stranger.

"Have you always known him?" he asked. "Where does he live? Why didn't you ever speak about him?"

"To tell the truth," said Peter's mother, "I haven't been thinking about him for the last two years—I never see him. He doesn't like people very well, and he goes off for days with the fishermen and paints in harbors and on islands. His wife went to our church, and while she lived I used to see him once in a while, but since her death he has been more and more of a hermit, and nobody dares to trouble him."

"What's a hermit?" asked Peter.

"A man who lives alone, away from other people," answered his mother.

"Oh!" was all that Peter said, but he felt more drawn to the wild man of the woods than ever, especially as it was a hermit, some one quite different from everyday folks, that he had come upon in his adventure.

"He lives in a little cottage at the edge of the woods, on the Porter Street side," Peter's mother went on. "All alone. Only by day an old woman comes and sweeps his room and cooks his meals for him—so they say."

"His son is in art school in Boston," said Peter, proud of his information.

"Did he tell you that?" asked his mother, surprised.

And when Peter nodded, she said: "That was a great deal of talk from him."

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To think that a wild man of the woods, a hermit, should have singled out Peter as the one live creature to whom he talked in the wide world! The whole day Peter's thoughts rushed back to the painter in the woods, Mr. Woodfin—what a strangely apt name, too!—and whatever he did that day, whether playing in the yard with Dick, or studying his lesson, or eating dinner, he was always really standing behind the wonderful stranger, watching the pine trees grow dark and the sea gleaming blue, and the sunspots golden under the painter's hands.

"You're not listening to what I'm saying," Peter heard his father say at dinner.

"I?" he asked, starting from his blissful meditation.

"Yes," his father replied. "You, of course. Your mother always listens and I listen to her. But Master Peter is not in the dining-room; I think we must look for him somewhere in the clouds."

It was queer how Peter never felt like laughing when his father said something that was meant to be funny, perhaps because his moist and kindly eyes always looked as if he were sorry for somebody.

So Peter didn't laugh, but answered seriously:

"I wasn't in the clouds. I was thinking what I'd like for my birthday."

For Peter's birthday was coming very soon in the next month.

"I thought you wanted 'Robinson Crusoe,'" said his father.

"But I want something else much more now," said Peter, turning red with excitement.

"You look as if it were something impossible," remarked his mother.

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"No, it's not impossible," Peter declared.

"Well—?" asked his mother, looking a little frightened, as if he were going to ask her for a pet giraffe.

"It's a paint-box!" Peter announced.

"A paint-box," repeated his father, puzzled. "Why a paint-box?"

"Besides, you've got one," said his mother.

"Oh, but mother!" Peter exclaimed, "that's only a baby one. I want a real one, with all the colors in it."

"I'm sure it was Mr. Woodfin that gave you that idea," said Peter's mother.

Peter grew still redder in the face: of course it was Mr. Woodfin who had made him want a new paint-box, but Peter didn't like to admit it. Although his mother knew more about Mr. Woodfin than he did, Peter liked to think of the painter as his own secret.

Peter was impatient for the morning, when he would get up early again and slip off into the woods to see his painter once more—if "the light was the same," as Mr. Woodfin had said. But unhappily Peter woke up the next day to the beat of rain on the roof, and when he looked out of the window he saw that a mist screened even the house across the road from his view. The light was not "the same," surely, and there would be no painter this morning in the woods. The next day the sky gave no greater hope, and a fine drizzling rain, with only short, fitful intervals of sunshine, lasted throughout the week.

On the first day of June, however, in the course of the morning, while Peter was at school glancing wistfully out of the window every few minutes, the sun came out brightly to stay, and Peter's heart leaped as he thought of the joy in store for him the next morning. When

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school was over, Peter took a roundabout way home and came to the edge of the woods. Whom should he meet there—Oh, just as he had hoped that he would—but Mr. Woodfin himself, walking home with his wooden stand and the plate with the colors and a box, all strapped together, in one hand, and the beautiful picture in the other, held at some distance from him because the paint was still moist.

Peter was so happy that he could not speak.

"Hallo, my boy," the painter began, "where are you going?"

"Home," said Peter. "Wasn't it too bad it rained so? But you're going to the same place tomorrow morning, aren't you?"

The man of the woods shook his head.

"That there's done," he said, nodding at the picture in his hand.

Peter's heart stood still: no more early mornings in the woods with his painter, when he had tasted only one!

"But aren't you going to start another picture?" he asked, cheered by the hope of a still lovelier place, perhaps deeper in the woods, or on the beach, or at the harbor, where he would go and seek the painter before school.

"Yes," said Mr. Woodfin, "I'm going on a cruise on a fishing schooner. I want to do some harbor sketches."

Peter felt that horrid tears had rushed into his eyes, and because he was afraid that Mr. Woodfin might see them he turned and winked at the sea, as if he were watching for a boat on the horizon.

"How long will you be gone on the cruise?" he asked.

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"Three or four weeks, I guess," said Mr. Woodfin.

"So long?" Peter cried out in bitter disappointment.
"Oh, how I wish I was going!"

"Perhaps you'll go, too, some day," said the painter, with a gruff laugh, "when your ma'll let you. Good luck to you, boy!"

He turned round to march off with his treasure.

"Let me look at the picture!" cried Peter, and the painter left him take a last long look at the trees and the sea and the sun spots of gold.

"That is grand!" was all Peter could say.

Mr. Woodfin laughed and stroked his wild-looking moustache.

"Enough!" he said, and turned the picture round.

Then he marched off and was out of sight in the woods.

Peter could not rejoice in the sunshine that made the rain drops glisten on the grass; he did not look at the daisies in the field any more than if they had been weeds; he was disappointed and angry and sad. He was late for lunch, because of his long way home, and after listening to his mother's well-known, "Why, Peter, you must come on time!" in silence, he sullenly ate alone.

In the afternoon he said to his mother in the most "by the way" manner that he could affect:

"Mr. Woodfin is going on a cruise for three or four weeks."

"Did he tell you so?" she asked. "Where did you see him?"

"On the way from school," said Peter.

"I suppose he is going to make sketches from the ports," his mother remarked, but she seemed much more absorbed in the lilies of the valley that she was arrang-

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ing in an ugly green vase than in Mr. Woodfin and his paintings.

"Go and put on a clean collar," she said, as if collars mattered to a boy who was unhappy. "If some of the ladies should see you, I would want you to look reputable."

Today was his mother's afternoon at home, when ladies in their gay summer hats would come tripping in one by one, and sit in the parlor and drink tea with lemon in it, and eat little sandwiches and cakes, and talk fast and call everything "perfectly charming." Peter knew all about it, because he had listened behind the parlor door.

Somehow he didn't feel like playing with Dick this afternoon, even though it was the first of June and a long-desired day of sunshine; but he would rather climb into the apple tree and think about how sad it was that Mr. Woodfin should be going away for so long, just when Peter had set his heart on beautiful hours with him in the summer mornings. So when Peter had put on a brand new collar for the ladies that might see him, he climbed into the big round apple tree that still wore many blossoms, though it was June today; some were scattered on the grass in the yard, and even a few on to the sidewalk on the other side of the fence. From his favorite seat on a queer twisted branch, with another bough to lean against, just like the back of a sofa, Peter could watch the callers come into the yard, as if he were spying from a tower.

The town clock had struck four, when the great stately door of the house opposite swung open, and out stepped Mrs. Grimshaw, tall, lean, dressed in black, like a long, thin shadow against the white house. Now Peter forgot

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his sorrow just for a moment to wonder if she were going out to call on his mother—she didn't have very far to go, surely. Mrs. Grimshaw lingered on her doorsteps and looked round and sniffed the air, then walked straight out of her yard, crossed the street and opened the gate in the fence, right under Peter's apple tree. She had the same dreary, discontented look that the Grimshaws always wore, and never guessed that she was being watched from the apple tree till she was safe inside the Loring house.

Next came Mrs. Goddard, the wife of "the other doctor," and, therefore, disliked by Peter. "The other doctor" was the doctor who wasn't Dick's father, and some people, for instance Mrs. Grimshaw when she had rheumatism, called gloomy, severe Dr. Goddard instead of Dr. Taylor who was kind and jolly and brought you little surprises when you had the measles. And now Mrs. Goddard came prancing into the yard, stiff and cold, with a little brown spring hat which was not the least bit gay.

As for gay hats, Peter had to laugh, for there came Harold's mother driving her little electric car, and then strutting into the yard, proud as a peacock. She was dressed all in green again, a light green suit and a hat with high green feathers that bobbed up and down in the breeze. She stopped to look back at her car almost under Peter's throne on the branches, and now he wished that his tree bore apples instead of blossoms, so that he might drop a big round one neatly on to Mrs. Montague's feathers. How she would start and look round, and—Well, there was no apple, and Harold's mother strutted into the house. Who would come next? This game of watchman in the tower was really good fun, even if one played with a heavy heart.

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Who was coming down the street far off, coming nearer now—a grown lady with two children? The lady was tall and walked slowly, and a little girl was skipping at either side. Oh, yes, Peter could see now that it was Mrs. Grey and that one of the children was Virginia.

Peter could not help laughing in his heart whenever he saw the beautiful lady of the garden, even though he saw her often, now that she was living in Gullport, for he could not help seeing again with the bright eye of his mind the glorious red poppies that had bloomed so long ago. It was wicked of Peter, surely, to be so joyful always in the memory of that day in his grandmother's garden, and for the last two years he never dared to think how sad his mother would be if she knew of his secret joy—for ever since that gloomy day a year ago last April when a telegram had made her cry and cry, Peter's mother always had tears in her eyes when she spoke of the good, white grandmother who was not sitting at her window with the heliotrope any more. Only this spring had Peter's mother put off her sad black dress, and Peter had felt guilty for thinking of red poppies and joy when he ought to have been keeping his mind on black and sorrow.

Mrs. Grey turned into the yard with Virginia and a little girl called Elsie Robins, who was Virginia's best friend. Peter picked off a single apple blossom and let it drop on the rim of Virginia's big straw hat.

"A blossom fell right on my hat!" cried the little girl. Then she looked up and saw Peter in the tree.

"You naughty boy!" she cried, clapping her hands and laughing. "That was you!"

Mrs. Grey looked up and laughed.

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"I suppose you saw us coming a mile off," she said. "Little watchman-in-the-tree!"

"Come on up!" Peter cried down to the little girls.

"The idea!" cried Elsie Robins, looking down at her stiff whiteness. "With our new shoes!"

"Some other time," said Virginia. "But we've got our second-best dresses on, and we're ladies today, making calls."

"How silly!" thought Peter, as he climbed down from his seat and jumped into the grass.

"Peter will show you his flowers," said Mrs. Grey to the little girls, "while I go in and talk to his mother."

Peter wished that the beautiful lady would stay, so that he could look at her longer and wonder at her clear gray eyes, and besides, he did not know what to do with these two children, who stood there so stiff and prim in their second-best dresses.

"There isn't much to show now!" he said, when Virginia's mother had left them. "The hyacinths are gone and the peonies are only just beginning to grow; they look funny, don't they, so brown and ugly. You'd never think they'd turn out big and red, would you?"

"Oh, I don't know," answered Virginia, "I don't like peonies, anyway; they don't smell; I only like roses."

"I like daisies best," said Elsie Robins.

"Oh, daisies!" scoffed Virginia. "They grow wild all over the fields. What do you like best?" she asked, turning to Peter.

Peter knew very well what flower he liked best in all the world, but he did not want to tell Virginia. He remembered—Oh, so clearly, as if it had happened only a week ago—how he saw the fairy-child with the sunny, golden

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curls in the sea of red poppies, and he knew that the fairy-child was Virginia. But she did not seem like a fairy-child now any more; her hair was no longer golden, but light brown, and although he liked her a little better than the others, she seemed just like any little girl.

"What is your favorite flower?" Virginia repeated.

"I can't tell you," said Peter.

"Why not?" she asked, astonished.

"Because," he replied, "it's a secret."

"Will you ever tell me?" asked Virginia.

"I don't know," Peter answered. "Perhaps sometime."

"Oh," cried Elsie Robins, "look at the lilies of the valley over there!"

Peter had forgotten the lilies of the valley by the fence in the corner of the yard, and the two little girls stooped down to breathe in their frail scent.

"You can pick all you want," said Peter, glad that he had something to offer his guests. "Mother says that makes them grow."

Then all three rushed upon the little lilies of the valley and picked them as fast as they could.

"I'm picking mine for your mother," said Peter to Virginia. "Don't you think she'll be glad?"

"You'd better pick them for another lady," said Virginia, "because mamma will see mine when I put them in a vase on the dining-room table."

"But I don't want to pick any for Harold's mother," Peter protested, "nor for Mrs. Goddard, nor for Mrs. Grimshaw!"

At that very moment the house door opened and Mrs. Grimshaw's gloomy face popped out, whereupon Virginia and Elsie began to giggle. But Mrs. Grimshaw

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did not even notice the children in the corner of the yard, for her eyes looked straight ahead and she hurried on as if she could not wait to be back in her own big, lonely mansion.

"What's coming there?" exclaimed Virginia, nudging Elsie, and pointing to a gay figure that was coming down the street toward the house. "Look at the hat!"

"Oh, that's Miss Fanny Runkle," said Elsie. "Don't make fun of her, Virginia. She's awfully nice."

"Oh, I know Miss Runkle," said Peter. "She comes here often. She's always full of taffy—just wait!"

Miss Runkle drew near in a lavender dress with a loosely waving coat of light yellow silk over it, a hat with plumes of purple and orange, much gayer than Mrs. Montague's, and a fluttering veil.

"Picking lilies of the valley?" she said, very sweetly, in a piping voice. "Isn't it just the right sort of day for the first of June?"

"Yes, it is," said Virginia and Elsie like a chorus.

"You look like two little fairies," said Miss Runkle, joining them on the grass. "A dark fairy and a light fairy—little Black-eyed Susan and little Forget-me-not."

"I'm Black-eyed Susan!" cried Virginia, dancing about.

"And I'm Forget-me-not," chirped Elsie, clapping her hands.

"And what is Peter?" asked Virginia, pointing at him.

"Oh," said Miss Runkle, thinking a moment, while Peter stood by grinning, "he's your little Peter Pan."

"What is Peter Pan?" asked Virginia.

"Oh, I know who Peter Pan is," cried Peter, for his mother had read him the story of the fairy boy. "But I'd rather be the pirate with the hook for a hand."

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Miss Runkle looked shocked.

"Oh, you wouldn't be the pirate," she said. "A nice little boy like you!"

Just then Mrs. Goddard came out of the house and with her Harold's mother. Both bowed rather stiffly to Miss Runkle, who was all smiles and pleasantness, and then Mrs. Montague smiled at the children in a cold, tired way, so that Peter did not want to bother her with messages to Harold.

"I must go in," said Miss Runkle, in a flutter, "your dear mother will think me a very late caller."

Then Miss Runkle hurried into the house, and after a while Peter said to Virginia:

"There's only your mother and Miss Runkle in there; I don't see why we can't go in and have some cake."

"Let's!" cried Virginia. "And I tell you what you can do," she added, pointing to the lilies of the valley in his hand. "You can give your bunch to Miss Runkle."

"Oh, I don't know," said Peter, undecided, for he really wanted to give them to the beautiful lady of the garden.

"Mother, here we are!" cried Peter.

"Come in, children," his mother called.

Hardly had Peter set his foot on the threshold of the parlor when Miss Runkle came rushing up to him, and putting her hands on his shoulders and hovering over him like a big, funny bird, she cried:

"Why, my dear little boy, your mother told me you wanted a paint-box for your birthday."

"I do," said Peter. "That's true, all right." Peter was puzzled.

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"You must know, Peter," his mother explained, "that Miss Runkle is a painter."

Miss Fanny Runkle a painter—a real painter like Mr. Woodfin! That was too hard to believe.

"A real painter?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Of course, a real painter," said his mother. "There is only one other in the town, and that's Mr. Woodfin."

So it was true: Miss Runkle and Mr. Woodfin!

"Why didn't you tell me before?" Peter gasped.

"Bless his heart!" cried Miss Runkle. "Your mother promised she would take you to see me sometime during your vacation, and then I'll show you all my pictures."

Peter was so excited that he did not even take any of the cakes and candies that Virginia and Elsie were nibbling.

"Are they big pictures?" he asked. "Are they the sea—or the woods—or houses? Are they—are they flowers——"

"When I'm older," interrupted Elsie, "I'm going to have lessons of Miss Runkle—I am."

"Oh, do you give lessons?" cried Peter. "I'd just love to learn. Can't I have lessons?" he asked, turning to his mother.

"We'll see," she answered, suddenly turning quite red. "You're not doing well enough in your arithmetic to deserve any extra lessons."

"Horrid, horrid 'rithmetic!" cried Virginia, and she danced about the room holding a pink peppermint in one hand. "When I'm older, I'm going to learn singing, la, la, la!"

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"I'm going to learn painting," said Peter, "but I don't want to wait till I'm old."

"I like that spirit," said Miss Runkle, and with much laughing and many sweet words she said good-by to all and fluttered out of the house.

"Come, Virginia, father is waiting," said the beautiful lady.

"Oh, not yet," pleaded Virginia, "it's so nice here."

But the lady of the garden led the two children away, and when he and his mother were alone, Peter perched on the arm of her chair and begged:

"Let me take painting lessons this summer, please—please—please!"

"I'll have to ask father, of course, Peter," said his mother a little sadly, "and I don't think he will like it."

"Ask him tonight!" said Peter impatiently. "As soon as he comes home!"

For Peter's father had spent the day in Boston to work in the library.

"There, his train is whistling now," Peter's mother said, jumping out of her armchair. "Let's walk down the street and meet him."

On the way she said to Peter eagerly: "Don't bother him tonight; he'll come home tired. I'll talk to him about it myself."

Peter hung his head, for he hated to wait so long for the decision.

"But tell him," he urged her, "I'd rather learn painting than all the 'rithmetic and geography and history in the world, and that I want it terribly much."

"I'll tell him," said his mother, with a queer smile.

'And so it happened that Peter did not tell his dearest

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wish to his father, but whispered to his mother every morning and every night of the next week:

"What did he say?"

And every time she answered with a mysterious smile:

"He hasn't made up his mind yet. Don't bother him."

Ever since Peter had found out that Miss Runkle was a painter and taught how to paint, he had consoled himself for the flight of Mr. Woodfin. Of course, Miss Runkle could not be compared with the wild man of the woods, the great wizard, but as long as he was gone she was better than no painter at all, and she did not seem funny to Peter any more.

The last day of school came with good-bys none too sad for Miss Bangs and her nose, and a noisy welcome to the long summer vacation. And the first day of vacation would be Peter's birthday. Peter went to bed early, wondering if the brand-new paint-box would be waiting for him in the morning. But if he had the paint-box and wouldn't be allowed to take lessons, what good would it do him then? Oh, of course, he could teach himself; besides, he was sure that he could paint lovely pictures already, and didn't need anyone to show him how. With this consolation he fell into a deep sleep, and woke up to the singing of birds in the apple tree. A whiff of sea air, mixed with all kinds of lovely fragrance from grass and flowers blew in at the window, as if it meant to say: "Wake up! Greetings on your birthday!"

So Peter got up quickly. But when he came into the dining-room his father and mother were already there, waiting for him; and in front of his plate was a round,

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white-frosted birthday cake with one, two, three—yes, ten candles. Ten years—Oh, how old he was today!

"You are a big boy, now," said his father.

"No, Peter will never be a big boy to me," said his mother.

And they said still more, but he could not listen, for there beside the cake he saw a big book with a blue and gold cover: "Robinson Crusoe." Peter took it up silently and began to look at the pictures, but somehow he could not say anything: of course, it was a beautiful book, with many pictures, and he had wanted this particular "Robinson Crusoe" like the one Harold had, but— Lightly his mother pulled him by the sleeve, and when he looked up she pointed to the little table by the window. Oh, joy—joy! There it was, all shining and new, the desired paint-box, with all the colors of the rainbow and more besides, and brushes thick and fine! Peter gave one shout and capered about in a wild war-dance.

"I am surprised to see how much he really cares for it," he heard his father say in a low voice, while Peter was still romping. "Where could he have got this taste?"

"Come, Peter, and blow out your candles!" said his mother. "You want to light them again this afternoon at your party."

So Peter blew out the candles, as many as possible with one breath, and the smell of wax mixed with the scent of flowers from outdoors. Now when he sat down to breakfast, he saw a little card on his plate—what could that be? It was just a lady's calling card, like the kind his mother had, with "Miss Fanny Runkle" on it, and underneath was written in his mother's writing: "Your painting teacher."

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Peter had to get up again and dance and skip round the table. Happy, happy birthday!

"This is the best birthday I ever had in my life," he declared.

"You've only had ten," said his father. "But you're a tenth of a century old."

A tenth of a century—how grand that sounded! But what did Peter care if he was a tenth or a whole century old, as long as he had his paint-box and was going to learn how to paint!

After breakfast Peter ran out of doors, because it seemed as if he must tell the apple tree and the birds and the whole world that this was his birthday. He stepped out on the porch and looked down the street. There was a little girl coming toward the house, with long, light brown hair waving in the breeze, and she carried a bouquet in her hand. As she came nearer, he saw that it was Virginia with a bunch of pink and white roses. She laughed as she skipped into the yard and said, lifting up the roses:

"They're from Aunt Clarissa's garden. And now, Peter, you must stand still on the steps there and listen to my piece. Mamma made it for me, but you're supposed to make believe I made it. Now, stand still!"

Peter obeyed, and Virginia tiptoed up to the first step on the piazza stairs and curtsied in a mischievous way, then recited in a merry, sing-song voice:

"You don't mind if little girls
With curls and upturned noses
Come and wish you happiness
And bring you garden roses?"

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**" You wonder how I heard
That your birthday comes this week ?
From a little bird
With a yellow beak.**

**" Now take these roses here,
I think that none are sweeter,
And happy birthday cheer
Virginia wishes Peter."**

CHAPTER IV

CHRISTMAS COMES BUT ONCE A YEAR

THE summer had been very happy for Peter, and the vacation months had passed like one long summer day of sea and woods and flowers and sunshine. Every morning, except Saturdays and Sundays, he had set out with his paint-box and Miss Runkle and Miss Runkle's paint-box to sketch for two hours some scene out of doors, a stretch of beach with bright greenish sea behind, a group of trees at the edge of the woods, or only a cluster of flowers in a garden. At first, Miss Runkle had made him draw his sketches only, although he always carried his precious paint-box along, but after a while she let him use his colors, and, as the summer advanced, allowed him more and more to do what he liked. The sea had felt cooler and more thrilling to swim in after he had painted it with all its cool, bewitching colors; the woods had seemed merrier to romp in when he knew just how the sunbeams slanted through the leaves, and each summer day Peter had played with greater joy, because his mind had been full of bright colors.

But when the autumn mists and rains had kept him and Miss Runkle from tramping out-doors to catch, with their brushes, the red and gold of the leaves, they

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had camped on different sheltering piazzas, sometimes on Peter's own, sometimes on Virginia's, sometimes on the Taylors,' and even once on Mira Mare. But now November frost had bitten the earth, and Miss Runkle shivered at the thought of sketching even on a piazza, though Peter would have perched with glee on one of the rocks to paint the great waves that towered into the air and crashed against the cliffs, shooting up fountains of snow-white spray.

But instead of that Peter, like a good boy, was sitting on a stiff chair in the Runkles' living-room, patiently drawing a spray of dahlias in a tall green vase. He was taking his lesson in the afternoon because school had begun again weeks ago, and ever since its beginning Peter's father had changed the daily painting lessons into weekly ones, for "school is more important," was his opinion. Although it was only half-past three o'clock, darkness was already beginning to settle on the alley outside, and Mrs. Runkle drew down the shades and lit the lamps.

"It's turning real chilly; I guess I'll stir up the embers," said the little wrinkled old lady in her cheerful, homelike voice, and pattered over to the open fire that had died down.

Miss Runkle was drawing the dahlias too from a different angle, and nodding encouragement to Peter at the other end of the room. The big, long-haired, gray cat lay purring at Peter's feet, and the tea-kettle was purring too, waiting for old Dr. Runkle to come home, when they would all stop their work and sit round the table with tea—hot lemonade for Peter—and the fragrant cake that Mrs. Runkle baked herself.

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After all, if you couldn't have grand pleasures, such as watching surf in a storm, you might as well have an altogether cosy, cheerful time in a low homelike room with old, old pictures and dim lamps and a fire crackling away as if it had an old yarn to tell. Now the old doctor was coming home too, from his "constitutional," as he called the walk that he always took in the afternoon, and he rubbed his thin, wrinkled hands and smiled at the fire with his kind little grayish face. Dr. Runkle was really no doctor any more, as Peter knew, because he was too old and tired for a doctor's hard work; but he was writing a learned book for doctors, and for that, as he had said, he needed to keep up his health and spirits. Dr. and Mrs. Runkle were both so old and wrinkled, like little mushrooms in the woods, but Peter loved them both as if they were his grandfather and grandmother.

"I guess it's time to stop," said Miss Runkle, and Peter gladly packed away his drawing tools, for he had found the dahlia in the green vase very dull.

Now Peter settled in a low armchair opposite the doctor and watched Miss Fanny Runkle make the tea, pouring water from the kettle over a silver ball on a chain into an old copper teapot. Miss Runkle looked like a bright-speckled toadstool between her wrinkled mushroom parents, in a queer orange-colored dress with green buttons for ornaments and an artificial orchid pinned on at her waist. Locks of her thick flaxen hair hung over her ears and her long jet earrings dangled like little black bells as she bent over the kettle. Nobody knew how old Miss Runkle was, though Harold had said once that she was much older than his mother.

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People always seemed to smile when she drew near on the street or in some strange house, but here in her home, by the dim light of the lamps, her queer orange dress and her fantastic hair—that was what Harold's mother had called it—and the many smiles on her pleasant, homely face, all seemed quite natural and lovely. Then the doctor talked about old times and Mrs. Runkle would nod and say, "That's right," and the cat purred and the fire crackled and Peter was quite happy in a peaceful indoor way, until it grew dark outside and Mrs. Runkle sent him home, because it was late for little boys.

On his way home Peter passed the house where Elsie Robins, Virginia's playmate, lived, and he saw her standing by the fence in her yard with a ball in her hand.

"Hello, Peter!" she called to him. "Where are you coming from?"

"I'm coming from my lesson with Miss Runkle," he answered.

"Oh, say!" Elsie cried, excited. "You know I'm going to take lessons with Miss Runkle, too. Isn't that fine? P'raps we can have ours together."

"Oh, no," said Peter. "I'll be far ahead of you—you'll have to begin at the beginning."

"Oh, will I?" asked Elsie. "I thought I knew how to paint a little. Well, I guess I'll make Virginia take lessons, too. It's as good as piano, isn't it?"

"Oh, sure," said Peter. "But girls mostly take piano."

As Peter walked on, his spirits were darkened, as if a cloud had settled over them; yet cheerful little Elsie was no cloud! Slowly he began to understand what was

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making him sad and what Elsie had to do with it: he did not want to have the same teacher as little girls of seven! Why did boys never take lessons with Miss Runkle—why did boys think that painting was silly? He did not want to ask his mother about this, because she would not know, and as for his father—Peter suspected that he, too, in his heart thought painting rather silly. There was nothing to do, then, but to wonder why things were so, and to let them be.

That night of Peter's walk home from Miss Runkle's, big feathery flakes of snow fell lazily, and when Peter went to bed the piazza roof beneath his window was white. The first snow! All the November dreariness was blown away by those gay white flakes, and there would be snowballing in the morning.

Snowballing there was for many mornings during the weeks that followed: snowballs flew on the way to school and in recess time and on the way home, and in the afternoons there were great battles in the woods. Dick and Ted Raffles and Timothy Simpkins and Red Mike and all the other boys of the neighborhood—even Harold, whose mother was keeping Mira Mare open till after Christmas this year—would come together in a clear place in the woods and then take sides, one led by Red Mike and the other by Harold. Peter was always on Harold's side for the sake of old friendship, though he knew that Mike's was the fiercer, as Red Mike was known for throwing three round, hard snowballs in the same time that others threw one, and he never seemed to get hit himself. There was much shouting and pushing and tumbling into the snow on those jolly battle-days, and Peter would come

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home to the blazing fire with tingling cheeks and icy feet.

Those were happy winter days, and if school and Miss Bangs and the home lessons had not interrupted the playing, they would have seemed like one long peal of merry laughter. But on Saturdays there was no check to fun, and Peter felt as if the wide world were his playground. It was on a bright, crisp Saturday afternoon that Peter set out with his sled for the woods to see who might be coasting down the steep hill—for the snow was hard and he was sure to find friends there on a Saturday afternoon. He was alone, for Dick had to make a snowman in the yard with his little brothers while his mother and the nurse were away, and Peter preferred older company. The hard, frozen snow glistened in the strong sunlight, and the twigs of bushes and trees, ice-frosted as they were, gleamed as if they were studded with jewels. Peter passed by the little gray cottage where Mr. Woodfin lived, and wondered what the wild man of the woods might be doing inside by the great fireplace of which Peter had sometimes caught a glimpse when the cottage door had stood open. He had not seen Mr. Woodfin since that June day, so long ago, when the wizard had told of the long cruises that would take him away all summer; and when the summer had gone by, Peter had watched for the solitary painter and had often prowled round his little rough cottage, but had not met him once. Perhaps he buried himself in the winter, like a fox, and would wake from his winter's sleep in spring! Wrapped in thoughts like these, Peter turned into the wood, which was truly a sparkling fairyland today. Icicles hung from the

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branches like intricate lacework from fairy hands, and pools of ice gleamed like mirrors in the snow. Skipping, stamping and sliding on, Peter came to the spot where in summer a little brook would babble over stones which seemed at this time a glistening waterfall of ice.

Oh! Just when Peter had been wondering about him, just when he had hoped and yet least expected to meet him—there stood Mr. Woodfin, the wizard of the woods, painting the icy brook! He stood with his back toward Peter and wore a great, wide overcoat; yet Peter knew him instantly—in the first place, because there was no other man who could paint in the town, and secondly, because he had a glimpse of the gray hair under the slouch hat, and he recognized the massive shoulders and the brisk stroke of the painter's arm. Peter tiptoed up to Mr. Woodfin, but not near enough to be heard, and watched him silently. There on the picture was the frozen brook, a tangle of gleaming icicles, behind it, the trees with the glistening icy branches and the light blue sky peering through them. To-day Mr. Woodfin was not painting with snakes of colors on a wooden plate—which Miss Runkle called oil colors on a palette—but with water colors, just as Miss Runkle painted and Peter himself; and the picture was small, besides. And yet how wonderful it was, how like the real brook and trees and sky, and yet even more beautiful—in a way! For a long time Peter did not dare to open his mouth.

"That blue in there is just the way it looks to me!" escaped his lips at last.

Mr. Woodfin turned round briskly, and when he saw Peter, laughed in his gruff way.

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"Haven't seen you for a long time, old chap!" he said, turning back to his work.

"I've been hoping to see you," said Peter. "Where were you all the time?"

"Been on cruises all summer, 'most up to October," Mr. Woodfin answered. "Had to go to Boston, off and on, the last two months. Guess you were at school when I was round here."

"I'm taking painting lessons now, you know," said Peter, with a tremor of pride in his voice.

"You are?" said the painter, squinting at the trees.

"Yes," Peter explained. "I've had them all through the summer, 'most every day and since school began, once a week. Miss Runkle is my teacher."

"Don't know her work," said Mr. Woodfin, and he seemed so absorbed in his painting now that Peter did not dare to say anything more. So he stood in silence, watching every stroke of the painter's brush with feverish attention.

Peter had stood this way for some time, when he heard something stir behind him. He turned round and saw a strange gentleman in a heavy fur coat, who was watching Mr. Woodfin too.

"Ah, my little friend!" said the stranger, in a low, melodious voice. "Don't you remember me, Master Loring?"

Peter stared at him: those black, gleaming eyes, that handsome face with the dark moustache—where had he seen them before?

"Oh, I know you!" he cried out suddenly. "You are the gentleman with the swan."

The stranger laughed.

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"Now see, your memory is better than mine," he said, gaily. "I had forgotten about the swan. You asked me what I liked best in all the world, because I had the impertinence to ask you——"

Now Peter remembered clearly how this bright gentleman had spoken to him, even two years ago, as politely as if Peter were grown up.

"It wasn't impertinent at all," Peter returned. "Because I was so glad to tell you——"

"A poppy, I believe, was your love," his companion went on.

"Not one poppy," said Peter, eagerly. "But many, many poppies—a great big sea of red poppies."

The word poppy had not been on Peter's lips for a long, long while, not even when he had spoken to the beautiful lady of the garden, but he knew now that the red glow of the poppies had been in his heart all the time.

What a wonderful man was this that made him tell about the red poppies, almost as wonderful as Mr. Woodfin himself! The painter meanwhile had not even turned round during Peter's conversation with the newcomer, but was working away with speed. Peter knew that grown-up people introduced strangers to each other, but he would never be able to go through such a complicated piece of politeness, nor did he dare to disturb Mr. Woodfin—and besides, although he now remembered the stranger distinctly, he had forgotten his name.

"I was going to call on your father and mother," said the polite gentleman. "Do you want to walk with me, or have you something better to do?"

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"Oh, I'll show you the way!" said Peter eagerly.

Now he remembered that he had set out to play with the boys, but he could play with them afterwards just as well.

"Good-by, Mr. Woodfin!" cried Peter.

"Good-by!" the painter said gruffly, hardly turning round.

As Peter walked home with the prince-like stranger, he felt very grown-up, very proud, and hoped that everybody on the street would be staring at them hard.

"Why did you stay away so long?" Peter asked his companion.

"I was abroad the last two summers," he replied. "And in the winter I rarely skip off on visits. I am an instructor in Harvard—I teach, you know, and that keeps me rooted there. But I have vacation now and my friend, Mrs. Montague, asked me to come down for the week-end—so here I am."

How exciting it was for Peter that the stranger was a guest of Mrs. Montague's and that he would be able to ask Harold all about him.

After a short silence the stranger said:

"That was a very good sketch. Do you know the painter?"

"Yes, I do," said Peter, feeling important. "He's Mr. Woodfin. He's a wonderful man. He goes on long cruises with the fishermen in the summer, and in winter he lives all alone in a little cottage—it is near here, I can show it to you—and paints all the time and never sees anyone at all."

"A hermit!" said the stranger.

"Yes, a hermit—that's what mother called him," re-

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marked Peter, and as he felt in a gay and talkative mood, he said what he had just told Mr. Woodfin: "I'm taking painting lessons now, you know."

"Indeed!" said the stranger, raising his eyebrows, as if he took a special interest in Peter's painting. "You must show me your sketches."

Peter was puzzled.

"You're a friend of father's, aren't you?" he asked shyly.

"I should be extremely honored if your father would call me his friend," was the polite answer.

"And you like books, too, don't you—learned books?" Peter asked, still with hesitation.

"I devote my life to writing books—books that at least pretend to be learned," said the stranger, in a light, gay voice.

"Well, now—" Peter felt the blood rush to his cheeks as he stammered: "You don't seem at all like somebody like father—you don't seem at all—bookish, you know."

The stranger laughed merrily.

"Not bookish!" he repeated. "Why, that's all I am. If I weren't bothered with teaching, I should bury myself in a library and never come to light."

"But—but you wanted to see my pictures," said Peter awkwardly. "And father doesn't care about pictures. I guess he thinks they're silly."

Peter was frightened: perhaps he ought not to have said that about his father!

His companion smiled mysteriously.

"Perhaps your father seeks beauty in other ways," he said.

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After a few moments silence, Peter began conversation along another line.

"When you were a boy," he asked, "what kind of games did you play?"

"I am sorry to say I played no games at all," said the stranger. "My childhood was very lonely."

"Oh!" exclaimed Peter, full of pity.

"You see, my mother was a Spanish lady who sat by her window embroidering all day long, and my father was a scholar and pored over his books day and night, and as we lived in the country and had no neighbors for a mile, I was my own companion always."

"And you never, never played with other boys?" cried Peter, struck with horror at the thought.

The stranger shook his head and smiled.

"But didn't you go to school?" asked Peter eagerly.

"No," said his companion. "Till I went to college at fifteen, I studied with my father and a tutor who lived with us."

"What was he like?" Peter asked, anxious to know everything about this strange man's life.

"He was a queer fellow," was the answer, "who played the flute in his leisure hours."

"The flute?" said Peter. "What is that like?" He had only heard the organ and the piano played, and once, at Mrs. Montague's, a violin.

"It has a very high, melancholy voice," said the stranger. "It used to give me gloomy dreams."

"But didn't you have any fun?" asked Peter, still anxious for the boyhood of his new friend.

"Oh yes, I had my fun," he answered, "roaming about the country by myself. Especially in winter, when

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the roads were quite lonely, I used to wander for hours alone. You see, I was just as much of a hermit as your painter there."

Two hermits, and how different they were—one so gruff and wild, and the other so polite and gay! Peter could not decide which was the most wonderful of the two.

Meanwhile they had reached the house, and Peter's mother stood on the porch with her hat and coat on.

"Why, Mr. Atherton!" she cried, turning red in her face with surprise. "What an unexpected pleasure!"

Atherton was the name, of course; how could Peter have forgotten it?

"I was watching Mr. Woodfin paint," Peter explained, eagerly, "and I turned round and saw Mr. Atherton watching too. Wasn't that funny?"

Peter's mother led the visitor into the parlor, and Peter followed, rather sorry that he could not have the new-comer for himself any longer.

"Mr. Loring has gone to see a parishioner," she said, "but he must come back any minute."

"Mother," said Peter, with excitement, "Mr. Atherton wanted to see my sketches. Perhaps I'd better get them now, before father comes home. Father'll have so much to say to Mr. Atherton," he added, remembering how he had told the stranger what his father thought about pictures, and fearing that Mr. Atherton might guess that he would rather not show his sketches in his father's presence.

"Why, Peter, I don't know if such a little boy's attempts at painting can be very interesting to Mr. Atherton," said Peter's mother, reproachfully.

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"Oh, but I want to see them," said the caller, with his engaging smile. "Master Peter and I have become friends on the road, and I am very eager to see what he can do!"

Peter rushed upstairs and flew down again with his big portfolio in his arms. Trembling with suspense, he drew out his best sketches and set them up on a chair by the window, so that the light fell on them as it should. There was the rock with a blue-green wave breaking behind it; the beach at low tide, with rosy and golden reflections on the sand; the group of pine trees in front of the deep, blue sea, and the autumn leaves in Miss Runkle's yard. Mr. Atherton looked at each silently with a nod and a slight smile, and Peter's heart thumped for fear that he would not like them. After the last, Mr. Atherton turned to Peter's mother and said in his musical voice:

"See that your son doesn't bury his talent."

Peter made a bound of joy. He did not quite understand what the stranger meant by these queer words to his mother, but he knew what "talent" meant, and he could tell that Mr. Atherton liked the pictures.

"Oh, mother," he said, in his excitement, led on by Mr. Atherton's approval and the pleased look on his mother's face, "I wish Mr. Woodfin was my teacher."

"Why, Peter!" returned his mother, startled. "You were so happy with Miss Runkle."

"Oh, Miss Runkle is all right," said Peter, "but Elsie Robins is going to have her, too, and Elsie is only a little girl of seven. It would be so fine to have a big man for teacher, and Mr. Woodfin's pictures are so grand. . . ."

Peter heard his father's footsteps outside.

"Father, here's Mr. Atherton!" he cried, running to meet him. "I found him in the woods."

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"Mr. Atherton—well, well!" said Peter's father, with surprise and pleasure on his face.

While his father shook hands heartily with Mr. Atherton and welcomed him after his long absence, Peter quickly gathered up his sketches and rushed upstairs with them, lest his father should see them and think it very impertinent of him to "show off" before such a distinguished caller. And then he went back into the woods to play with the boys in the snow.

Christmas was in the air. Holly and mistletoe and red ribbons made the shop windows bright, and in the markets were heaps of garlands and branches. Every grown-up acquaintance whom Peter met on the street looked as if he had some lovely secret, and every child looked merrier than at any other time of the year. It was strange that outside of the town, over the fields and the woods, where there were no signs of "Christmas sale" and "holiday gifts" there hovered the same mystery, as if the trees knew that Christmas was near.

When school closed, a week before Christmas, Miss Runkle said that Peter might come to her house every morning to paint a design that he had been thinking out as a Christmas gift for his father and mother. Peter would skip off, telling his mother that he was going to Dick's to play, and enter Miss Runkle's house with a thrilling secrecy, as if he were doing something forbidden. Then he would paint his design of a Christmas tree with tall candlesticks, like columns, on either side, and an open book beneath it, with the words "Merry Christmas." Meanwhile Mrs. Runkle would string popcorn and gild pine-cones by the fire, and Miss Runkle would

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paint beautiful Christmas cards with gold backgrounds and angels and lighted windows and bayberry candles. There was nothing like a lesson about these mornings, especially when Miss Runkle told stories and hummed old tunes; they seemed to Peter more like painting-parties.

It was after the third of these mornings that Peter's mother called to him when he came home:

"Oh, Peter; you'll be sorry when you hear what you've missed!"

"What?" asked Peter. "Was Dick here?"

"I thought you had just come from Dick's house," said his mother.

"I mean Harold, of course," said Peter, blushing, and his heart beat fast as he trembled for the safety of his secret.

But his mother guessed nothing, and replied:

"Mr. Woodfin has been here."

"Mr. Woodfin!" cried Peter, all disappointment and anger, and he was just going to say: "There I was with Miss Runkle, and I might have been with Mr. Woodfin!" when he checked himself and said: "But why did he come in the morning—nobody else ever comes to see you in the morning."

"I was standing on the piazza throwing crumbs to the sparrows," said Peter's mother, "when I saw him pass by, and then I asked him if he wouldn't come up, and he came."

"Oh, dear," moaned Peter, "why wasn't I here? What did you talk about?"

"He told me about his son Jack," said his mother, "and about his pictures and his cruises in the summer——"

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"And did you tell him to come again after Christmas," Peter interrupted, "to look at the tree?"

"I told him to come and look at the tree, and I think he may do it," said Peter's mother, with a mysterious smile. "And besides, I showed him some of your sketches."

"You did!" cried Peter, fairly jumping at his mother in his joyful excitement. "What did he say?"

But she smiled again in the same mysterious way, and made Peter quite impatient.

"You had better wait till he comes again," she said, "and ask him yourself."

"Oh, tell me now!" Peter clamored. "Which ones did you show him?"

"The same that you showed Mr. Atherton," his mother replied, still with the annoying smile.

"Which did he like best?" Peter asked, for he must find out something in his impatience.

"The one with the autumn leaves," said his mother.

"The last one I did!" exclaimed Peter. "I guess that is the best."

Peter wondered, during the days that followed, if his mother put on the mysterious smile whenever he asked her about Mr. Woodfin just because there was mystery everywhere in this last week before Christmas. Two rooms in the house—the guest-room and his mother's little sewing-room—Peter was not allowed to peep in.

"Don't you know that Santa Claus is our guest in there?" his mother would say when he stood, burning with curiosity, with his hand on the doorknob of the spare-room. Then Peter would remember that he had a secret too, and skip off laughing to himself.

As the days flew by, the mystery in the air grew like

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a thickening mist. Peter's mother, who never touched the piano the whole year round, rumaged after old music books and played carols for herself and Peter to sing in the evenings. Then, when the candles were lit on the piano and made a golden glow, it seemed as if Christmas were stealing into the room through the cracks in the window. Even Peter's father, who was busiest at this season, so that Peter kept saying, "Poor father has to work hardest on holidays," nevertheless took one evening off to read aloud "The Christmas Carol," as he had done every year since Peter was six years old. Then Peter put a mighty log on the fire and threw in some driftwood to make the flames blue and green, and when there was a great, jolly blaze they all drew their chairs round the fire, Peter's mother took up her embroidery, and Peter's father began in a deep voice:

"Marly was dead, to begin with."

How Peter listened eagerly, as if he had never heard the adventures of Scrooge before, and yet every word of the story seemed like an old friend. During the pauses of the reading, low, rich sounds from the organ in the church, where the choir was practicing the anthems for Christmas morning, floated into the room, muffled, so that one could not tell the melody, but beautiful as if the air outside were all music.

The next day Peter's mother took him to a vesper service in the church, which was quite transformed into a Christmas grove of fir trees. Bright red poinsettias made Peter's heart leap with joy, and when he saw his father in the pulpit among green branches with a mild glow from the shaded lights falling on his face, it seemed to Peter that he was not seeing his father at all, but one of the wise

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men that came from the Orient. And Peter's father read the story of the Nativity. When the sound of the last word had died away, the organ set in with a great, singing peal, like the sea rising at high tide, and above it a man's voice clear and strong:

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people——"

While the aria rang out, and after it the hymns and carols that he knew so well—"The First Noël," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," "Silent Night, Holy Night," and "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing"—Peter fixed his eye on the red poinsettias and it seemed to him that they were singing carols too with their bright joyful redness.

When they stepped out again into the hushed street, the full moon was glowing in the black sky behind the pointed gray church spire; the pine tree loomed up beside the church like a jet-black shadow, but the snow on its branches and on the ground below glistened silently in the magic light.

"Silent night, holy night"—hummed Peter's mother.

Peter was living in a spell and could not say a word till they had reached the house door.

"Only two more nights!" he cried, jubilantly, "and then I'm going to have my party."

For Peter was going to have a children's party. Uncle Joe and Aunt Eliza were coming from Boston to spend Christmas Day, but Christmas Eve was to belong altogether to Peter's friends, with no grown-up people by, except Dick's father and mother, and Mr. Grey with the lady of the garden. Peter had hoped that his strange grown-up friend, Mr. Atherton, might come too with Harold, as he was visiting Harold's mother, but Mrs. Montague was giving a house-party on Christmas Eve,

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and she could not spare her guest, though she would gladly send Harold to Peter's party—poor Harold, who would otherwise be lonely with all the grown-up people at Mira Mare.

When Christmas Eve had come at last, Peter was so excited that he could not talk clearly, and when he followed his mother down to the library, he was silent. Throughout the whole house there was an unnatural hush.

Peter opened the door; a great shout greeted him and a peal of laughter—for there all the children were assembled, a half-hour before he had thought that they were coming! In a twinkling they were swarming round him and crying: "Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas, Peter!" There was Dick and his little brothers, and Harold, and Ted and Bill Raffles, and Timothy Simpkins and his sister, and Joe Noodles, and even Red Mike; in a corner behind a chair stood Elsie Robins, and piped:

"Virginia is coming, too; but she's late!"

Peter was too happy to do anything but laugh, as he skipped from one of his guests to the other.

"Where's father?" he asked suddenly, for in his first excitement he had not noticed that his father, who of all people belonged here most, was not in the room.

"I guess he's busy with Santa Claus," said Mrs. Taylor, who was smiling mysteriously at Peter's mother.

Hardly had she spoken, when Peter's father appeared in the doorway and asked eagerly:

"Has Virginia come yet?"

No one answered, for all at once a high silvery voice started to sing outside of the library window. The voice was very small, but lovely, like the ringing of a little bell.

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Peter's mother opened the window gently, and all listened breathlessly to the song:

**"God rest ye, merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Saviour was born on Christmas Day."**

When the last happy note had faded and all the children still were sitting spellbound, Peter rushed to the door to call in the little waif who must be cold, singing and strolling, as he had heard these wandering minstrels did, from house to house.

"Why, it's Virginia!" he cried, on the porch, from which he saw by moonlight Virginia, all wrapped in furs, standing beneath the window, and her father and mother behind her. "Oh, come in, Virginia; I thought it was a little boy singing."

Virginia skipped into the house, threw off her furs, warmed her cold hands by the fire, laughed merrily and seemed a little wood sprite. Her father and mother came in, too: Mr. Grey, whom Peter saw rarely, very tall and stately, and the lady of the garden more beautiful than ever, dressed in pale gray, with a twig of holly on her gown.

"Now, all come in!" called Peter's father genially, and there was a rush for the parlor opposite. The door was still closed and the eager children stopped short and waited, speechless.

The door was opened: the tree, Oh, the tree! At first it was just one great cobweb of silver threads glistening under the golden candle flames; then Peter saw little icicles twinkle at the tips of the branches, chains of silver and green and gold, and gilded pine-cones and silver stars

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and—Oh, at the top, a bright red ball, like a red flower springing from the Christmas tree.

Peter clapped his hands and laughed with joy.

"You like your tree!" said Virginia's mother, who was standing behind Peter.

"I love it!" said Peter. "And do you know what I like best on it?"

"The candles, I should think," said the beautiful lady, "or, perhaps, the icicles?"

"No," said Peter, looking up at her eagerly. "It's the red ball up there at the top—isn't it bright and red? It's as good as the red poppies."

Peter forgot in his excitement that he was shouting out his dearest secret, but the others were all making a great noise, now that the first hush of awe was over, and no one had heard him but the beautiful lady of the garden, who smiled at him and said:

"Surely; it's your red winter poppy!"

His red winter poppy—yes, that it was, and Peter felt very happy.

"Perhaps Virginia will sing us another song," suggested Peter's father.

"Oh, yes; do, do!" cried all the children.

Then Mrs. Grey sat down at the piano and accompanied Virginia as she sang in her high silvery voice the joyful song: "I Saw Three Ships Come Sailing By," with its refrain, in which all joined, "On Christmas Day in the Morning."

When she had sung the last stanza, Virginia turned round sharply to Peter and said:

"Now you sing!"

"I can't!" said Peter. "Who can?"

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But there came no answer. Meanwhile, Peter's father and mother had been opening his gift for them, and showing it to the Taylors—for Peter saw it all with a corner of his eye, while he was really looking at Virginia—and Mrs. Taylor now held up his picture and said to the children:

"This is what Peter can do." . . .

"Oh my, did you do that?"

"Gee, isn't it pretty!"

"The Christmas tree and candles!"

So cried the children, and Peter's mother whispered in his ear:

"It's lovely, Peter! I'm proud of it."

And even Peter's father slapped him on the shoulder and said: "That's very nice work, my boy!" And he looked pleased with his present, even though it was a picture.

But Mrs. Grey took up his design and looked at it a long time with a mysterious smile, then turned to Peter and asked in her musical voice, like the sea wind:

"Did you think that out all by yourself?"

Peter nodded, and although she said nothing further, Peter was sure that the beautiful lady of the garden liked the picture more than all the rest.

"You know, Peter," said Elsie, "I'm going to have lessons from Miss Runkle now."

"And I too," said Virginia, eagerly. . "And Jean Mason and Nellie Bridgman, and lots of girls. Miss Runkle's going to teach drawing at our school—after Christmas vacation she's going to start—and everybody wants to take it, and she says she doesn't see how she'll have time for Peter Loring."

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"Oh, dear!" cried Peter. "I hope she won't drop me!"

Secretly he was thinking though how disagreeable it would be to share a painting teacher with so many little girls. But as he did not want to think of anything that wasn't joyful on Christmas Eve, he looked up at the red ball on the Christmas tree and its gleaming light chased away every shadow.

"Oh, I forgot!" suddenly exclaimed Harold, and dashed into the hall.

"What did you forget?" cried Peter, rushing after him.

"Your present from Mr. Atherton," said Harold, pulling out a package from under his coat.

"From Mr. Atherton!" exclaimed Peter.

He tore off the wrapping and found in his hands a beautiful picture of a swan gliding on a dark stream, with his long, slender neck curved down to the water.

"Oh, that's his swan!" said Peter, with delight.

"His swan—what do you mean?" asked Harold.

"Oh, that's a secret between Mr. Atherton and me," replied Peter, and ran back to the merry company to show the gift that made him proud.

But when he stepped into the parlor, he found a hush of suspense and the children sitting in a ring on the floor with all eyes and many mouths wide open.

"Come, boys!" called Peter's mother, and beckoned to him and Harold to sit down, too.

'A strange, rattling noise was sounding from the fireplace, so that Peter and all the others started to look in that direction, although there was no fire at all in this room, and a screen stood in front of the andirons. Then came a stamping of heavy boots. Wonder of wonders—who could be stamping behind the screen in the fireplace?

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"Oh!"—One scream of fright and delight from the children, for there stood Santa Claus himself! Peter forgot that he did not believe in Santa Claus, because he saw him now with his own eyes. His beard was long, shaggy and white; his cheeks and nose were red and jolly, as if he had just been riding in the cold wind; his eyebrows bushy and gray; he wore a suit of bright red wool and a fur cap pulled down low over his forehead, and on his back he carried a bulky bag.

"My reindeer were waiting on the roof, and they're impatient," said Santa Claus in a deep, gruff voice. "But before I go on my round to all your chimneys to swoop down and fill your stockings, children, I am going to drop a little token for each one of you now, so that you won't forget it was Santa Claus who filled your stockings."

"Oh!" gasped the children in a breath.

"How did he know we were here, mother?" whispered Virginia.

Then Santa Claus stepped into the middle of the ring that the children had formed on the floor, and stooping low, emptied his bag on the rug. Out flew little tagged packages, and the children scrambled after them, tumbling over one another.

"Oh, what a dear little baby doll!" cried Virginia.

"Gee, ain't dat a fine knife?" exclaimed Red Mike.

"Oh, Dick, look at my balloon!" cried Dick's little brother Tommy.

Peter found a picture puzzle for himself, but he had hardly looked at it when another boy pulled him over to look at his present, and then another, and another——

"Santa Claus is going, children," said Peter's father.

"Oh, no; stay, stay!" cried the children.

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"I can't stay," said Santa Claus, shaking his shaggy head, "my reindeer will fly away."

His voice was not as deep now as it had been at first, but it was still gruff, like a voice that Peter had heard before.

Peter looked into the eyes of Santa Claus, and all at once it seemed as if he had looked at these gray-green eyes, with the bushy gray brows, before.

Now Peter remembered suddenly that he did not believe in Santa Claus, and all was strange and puzzling.

"Good-by, Santa Claus!" cried the children, waving their presents. "Good-by!"

Santa Claus stepped behind the screen; there was a stamping again at the fireplace and he was gone. Peter's father was gone, too. Somehow, Peter could not enter immediately into the fun and noise-making about him, because something was working in the depth of his mind—he could not tell what. He found himself wondering why his mother had quickly shut the parlor door.

After a while Peter heard the house door open and close, and then his father came back into the room and sat down by Mrs. Grey. Peter slipped out of the room quietly, when all were talking and laughing—why, he could tell but vaguely. As he saw Harold's warm overcoat lying in the hall, he slipped it on and ran out of doors. There was a figure as big and broad as Santa Claus in a great fur coat tramping down the street. Peter ran after it as fast as he could against the cold night wind.

"Santa Claus! Santa Claus!" he cried, panting.

At last Santa Claus turned round; his beard was gone and the moonlight fell on the face of Mr. Woodfin.

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"I knew it was you!" cried Peter, quivering with excitement. "I knew it was you—but I didn't dare to think!"

Santa Claus—no, Mr. Woodfin—broke into a hoarse, merry laugh.

"So you knew, did you?" he said. "Well, you're a bright boy."

"I didn't know at first," said Peter, remembering now; "but afterward, when your voice was different. But it doesn't matter," he added with ardor, "it's all the same—it's just as exciting to have you here at Christmas as Santa Claus."

The painter laughed again.

"Well, now that we've met this way," he said, "I might as well tell you myself. Your mother was going to put my letter into your stocking tonight."

"Your letter?" asked Peter, mystified.

"The letter," explained Mr. Woodfin, "that I wrote her saying I'll be glad to give you painting lessons."

Peter was speechless. He was to have lessons of Mr. Woodfin, the wild man of the woods—his dearest wish had come true!

"Your mother showed me your sketches, that day I came in and you were out," said Mr. Woodfin, "and she told me you were rather wishing you might change teachers. Then I thought it over if I'd take a pupil again—and now when spring comes, we'll go sketching together."

"Oh, I'm so glad, I'm so glad!" cried Peter over and over again, till his great Santa Claus simply said, "Good-by" and walked away.

When Peter came back to the house, the children were all sitting round the dining-room table at supper.

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"Why, Peter, where have you been?" cried his mother. "You're a nice host!"

"I went to look for Santa Claus," answered Peter.

"Oh, did you see him?" clamored all the children.

"That's my secret," said Peter, and he whispered into his mother's ear:

"I saw him—I talked to him—Santa Claus—Mr. Woodfin—he told me—I'm so glad!"

"Don't tell the other children!" warned his mother with her finger on her lips.

"Tell us—did you see the reindeer?" asked Virginia.

"I mustn't tell," said Peter, and he had a hard time dodging questions.

Peter was almost too excited to eat, although there was an abundance of ice-cream and cake and candies and raisins and nuts and all good things. Although he was laughing and shouting with the other children, he was really all the time standing with Santa Claus on the street by moonlight and hearing the happy news.

When the children had all departed with much flutter and laughing, and the grown-up people too, and his father and mother sat contentedly on the sofa, Peter dropped on a footstool and stared at the gleaming red ball on the Christmas tree and said: "I'm so glad, I'm so glad!"

Then he told his father and mother about his pursuit of Santa Claus, his father looked shocked, but laughed heartily nevertheless, and his mother said:

"Now you know your best present already. But you will want to find your stocking full just the same tomorrow; so you had better go to bed—Christmas has really only just begun."

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"Oh, I hope it will never stop being Christmas!" said Peter, and rubbing his eyes and casting a last glance at the red ball on the Christmas tree, he stumbled reluctantly upstairs. It was so quiet in his room, after all the merry noise of the evening, and the moonlight on the snow looked peaceful, as if the world outside were still waiting for Christmas to descend. Peter opened his window: the least rustling in the air seemed like the beat of an angel's wings.

As Peter crept into bed he saw his stockings, like long black shadows, hanging by the fireplace. So there were still joys for the morning, when he was already so happy that one more drop of joy would overflow his heart! The happiness of the Eve passed in gay visions before his closed eyes, and then all hardened into one bright red ball at the top of the Christmas tree, and dissolved again into a train of sparkling visions.

And Peter said over and over again, to lull himself to sleep:

"Christmas comes but once a year,
And when it comes, it brings good cheer."

CHAPTER V

IN AUNT CLARISSA'S GARDEN

EIGHT years of work and play had gone by and Peter's school days were over. Peter had passed his entrance examinations—he was eighteen years old last month—and for three days had been a sub-Freshman. The summer days were not long enough now to celebrate in, to do nothing in from morning till night with a zest unparalleled. Dick had passed, too, and there was great joy in the town, and most abundantly in the house of the Reverend Mr. Loring, who seemed to walk in a radiant golden cloud. Only on the proud seat of Mira Mare there was secret gnashing of teeth, for Harold had "flunked," and over his vista of vacation hung, like a black cloud, the prospect of being tutored all summer.

"I was captain of the track team at school, you know," he had boasted to Peter, only three days ago. "I've got some pretty good chances."

And he had strung up a list of the clubs he would "make" like a chain of pearls, when the fateful letter from the college arrived and cut the precious chain brutally in two.

Pity for Harold, however, did not keep Dick and Peter from dancing war dances on the sand by the red light of a great bonfire on the night after the good news had

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come, nor from planning the most and the greatest delights that they could crowd into the long summer days that followed. So they would go in swimming in the middle of the forenoon and linger lazily on the sand, watching the tide creep in, and reflecting with a relish that it was quite right, quite virtuous to lie in the sand and do nothing; in the afternoons they would row or sail in Dick's little dory, or play brisk sets of tennis; the nights were given up to frolics on the verandas of neighbors and friends, or moonlight strolls on the long beach.

But after two weeks of undiluted pleasures, the joy in idleness began to wane because it was no longer dear, and Peter waited with growing impatience for the return from one of his sketching cruises of his good teacher, Mr. Woodfin. Through all the long, dreary school year Peter had touched his paints only once in a while—and then as if he were holding a forbidden tryst—for he had poured all his strength and spirits into the study that he disliked, knowing, as he did, that there was only one key to his earthly paradise, and that was to prove that he could go to college, even though he did not want to go. At last Mr. Woodfin had come back, and once more Peter was standing on the beach in front of his easel beside his beloved rough teacher. The sea, at high tide, was a lucid green—a beguiling green, that seemed to hold many other fleeting colors in its depth, and Peter's heart beat with a joy long lost and all the more precious regained, as his brush flew in pursuit of the enticing color.

"I'm not going to look at another printed page," he said to Mr. Woodfin. "I'm sick and tired of black and white; it's only colors that I'm going to lay eyes on this summer!"

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"You don't seem to be keen on study," laughed his teacher.

"No, I'm not," answered Peter, "and never was and never shall be. You know what I'm keen on, and you're the only one in this blessed town who understands—except Miss Runkle," he added, with a bitter smile.

Miss Runkle, good soul, was always in a flutter about her many little pupils at the girls' private school, and Peter knew now, without accusing himself of conceit, that the paintings by his first teacher were poorer than his own.

"I'm not going to think about the end of the summer, at all," Peter began again. "I'm just going to paint away and forget everything else, as if this summer would last forever."

Mr. Woodfin very often made no answer at all, and Peter was always sure that the silent hermit never would repeat what he had heard, so that to confide to him was like confiding to a rock that listened, immovable, to the telltale sea.

To Dick, Peter could not speak of the rebellion in his heart, and when his comrade would begin with:

"When we'll be room-mates," or "By the time we're Sophomores"—Peter felt like a traitor all the while.

"Oh, let's not plan so far ahead," he would say. "Let's make the most of the summer while it lasts."

"But it's fun to plan," Dick would respond. "How queer you are about it!"

Sometimes his secret wish weighed heavily on Peter's spirits, and he was aware with misgivings that one day not far distant he would have to reveal it to his father and decide his fate. But Peter's father was so proud of the son who had passed all his examinations, and so radiant,

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when he planned out courses of study for him, that Peter had not the heart to fling a bomb into his castle in the air. Perhaps it had been wrong of Peter, after all, never to give voice to his true passion during the last school year, although he had declared it often enough in years gone by; perhaps what had seemed to him prudent foresight had been but foolishness—for now that his father believed him on the right road to a studious career, the shock would be too great if Peter should announce all at once that he did not even want to enter college. As for his mother, Peter suspected that she guessed where his heart really lingered, but for a peculiar reason he could not seek her advice. For his mother had a way of liking the peonies in the yard because "Peter thinks they are so pretty," and enjoying a twilight hour on the porch because "father finds it so restful;" but she never liked a peony because it was red and jolly in her eyes, or an evening revery because it was soothing to her own spirits, and alas!—when father's and Peter's delights conflicted, she was like an anxious bird fluttering from one to the other. In these days Peter's mother was absorbed in planning a welcome for Mrs. Grey and Virginia, who were soon coming back to stay at home for good, after their six years' absence in warm climates in winter and watering-places in summer on account of Mrs. Grey's health, which now was practically restored. To the beautiful lady of the garden, the idol of his childhood, Peter's imagination clung once more with a vague hope that she might in some miraculous way help to shape his destiny.

There was yet another figure in Peter's world whom he kept in reserve to call upon at a time when he should need another's magic power of persuasion—and that was

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Maurice Atherton. Peter had never forgotten how Mr. Atherton had taken his side, four years ago, when he had first told his father that he did not want to go to college, and he believed that he could still rely on the strange philosopher's fine understanding.

It was on a hot, languid afternoon, when the townspeople had all closed their blinds and only a few were slouching over the baked sidewalks, that Peter strolled to Mira Mare on the windswept promontory, in pursuit of a cool breeze. On the most exposed side of the broad veranda, he found Harold sprawling in a Gloucester hammock, with a pile of schoolbooks scattered about.

"Jeffs is coming in a minute," he groaned, "on this beastly day."

Jeffs was Harold's tutor, and the torture of his gay young life.

"Well, I'll go down on the rock and sleep," said Peter. "I didn't come to see you; really, I came to catch a breeze."

"Ma's taking a nap; so is Aunt Hetty, and Pa's away, as usual," Harold went on, in his flippant tone, "but you'll find Atherton on the other side. Go and talk to him."

So Mr. Atherton was visiting here again! No companion could be more welcome to Peter, who walked to the other side of the drowsy house and found Mr. Atherton reading in a low armchair and cutting the leaves of a small volume.

"Ah, Peter, welcome!" he cried, and extended his hand, languidly. "Come and distract me. I'm bored."

"With that book?" asked Peter, glancing at the slender volume in Mr. Atherton's hands.

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"Yes," said the philosopher. "My poems have just come out, and I find that I don't like them."

"Oh, I didn't know that you were a poet," Peter exclaimed, in new admiration.

"No more than you are, my friend," Mr. Atherton replied, lightly, "only I have drifted into the black-and-white form."

"Is painting a kind of poetry?" asked Peter, to whom no one had ever spoken in this strain.

"Oh, isn't it all one?" his companion returned, "whether you sing in colors or paint in words, or speak in music? If we were Archangels we might imbibe the rainbow-tinted music of the spheres with one all-inclusive sense."

Peter looked out over the light blue sea in a reverie: this was all new to him and foreign, as if a merman had risen dripping out of the water and had spoken to him in the language of starfish and oysters.

"Won't you read me your poems?" he broke the long silence.

Mr. Atherton consented, but told Peter to follow him down to the beach, lest his reading might wake up some of the napping inmates of the house.

The water had a delicate forget-me-not shade, and the tide was very low, so that an abundance of seaweed, glistening bits of shells, little silvery fish and glassy jellyfish lay on the shining wet sand. An exquisite coolness seemed to spread from the sea and sand, though there was scarcely a breeze, and even the low, monotonous murmur of the tide was cooling. As they walked up and down, Mr. Atherton read aloud from his poems, and strangely it happened—or, perhaps, he chose them on purpose—that they were mostly odes and sonnets to the

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sea. Peter forgot the hostility toward the whole world of letters that he had acquired during the last years of school; he forgot that he was walking with a learned man, a friend of his father's; he forgot everything else while he seemed to hear the sea itself speak in melodious, rhythmic lines. There was nothing even that reminded him of a book, for he might as well be looking at a gorgeous train of colors—a sunrise with changing clouds of purple, gold and pale rose reflecting in the sea!

"More! more!" cried Peter, when his companion had closed the little book and slipped it into his pocket.

Mr. Atherton shook his head with his old gay smile, and replied:

"Enough, no more!

'Tis not so sweet now as it was before!"

A white figure had become visible on the veranda of Mira Mare, and Mr. Atherton had to join his hostess. So Peter said good-by and as he walked back slowly, like one who has been all day on a rolling ship and has not accustomed his feet to land, it seemed to Peter that the half-hour with Maurice Atherton had been unreal, a kind of mirage in his soul, beautiful, beguiling, but severed from the rest of life.

Peter could not go home now, back into the sober house where the light had been shut out with the heat on this languid day; he could not hear his mother remark on the rise of the temperature, or see his father pore with his dim eyes over heavy books in the darkened study, as if one diligent hour more or less spent on his sermon were of any consequence at all. No, Peter, like a mariner who

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feels cramped and uneasy on land, had to set sail again on the sea of high adventure.

So when he had crossed the causeway, Peter turned in the opposite direction from his homeward course. Heat rose almost visibly from the pavement, and the houses, with shutters closed, all seemed to be taking a nap. When he came to the large, old house that belonged to Mr. Grey's sister, called Miss Clarissa by all the town, a whiff of heavy, sweet garden scents made him turn round the street corner to look at the garden whence the fragrance rose.

Oh, lovely adventure! In the midst of quaint, old-fashioned blossoms, gathering gilly-flowers, stood Virginia! Peter had not seen her for six years, and yet he knew it was Virginia, though she seemed a very different, older sister of the child he had known before. She could not be more than fifteen, but he would have taken her for seventeen or eighteen, had he not known; her hair, once light brown, was dark and wavy like her mother's, and she was slender and her profile no less exquisite than that of the beautiful lady of the garden. How strange that his imagination should have flown to Virginia's mother all these years, never dreaming that there was another lady of the garden no less beautiful, and young like Peter himself.

Virginia looked up from the gilly-flowers and saw him. Her eyes were startling—not gray and calm, like her mother's, but dark and brilliant, at once melancholy and gay.

"Why, Peter!" cried Virginia. "You must be Peter—I can tell that by the way you used to have of staring into the air, as if you were in a trance."

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Peter opened the garden gate and greeted her with outstretched hand: "I'm mighty glad to see you back, Virginia. I didn't know you were here——"

"We've come sooner than we planned at first," she replied, with laughter in her eyes. "We're with Aunt Clarissa—I've been away so long! Why, it's just a bit uncanny, you know, to come home like Rip Van Winkle."

"Aren't you glad to be home again?" asked Peter, who had never lived outside of Gullport, and could not think of life elsewhere as quite genuine.

"Come into the bower, where it's shady," Virginia invited him. "And we can talk."

She had a slight French accent that sounded musical and distinguished to Peter's ear. He followed her into a green bower of fragrant honeysuckle, and from his seat there he saw the many-colored garden as in a frame of horseshoe form.

"Isn't it lovely here?" said Virginia, burying her face in her gilly-flowers. "I've often been homesick for Aunt Clarissa's garden."

"It must seem good to get home again, after living in foreign countries so long," remarked Peter.

Virginia smiled wistfully.

"Yes, it does," she said, in a meek, unconvinced tone. Then she looked straight into Peter's eyes and asked him suddenly: "Do you still paint?"

"You bet I paint!" Peter exclaimed. "It's the only thing I care about in the world! And I have a fine teacher—Mr. Woodfin. He knows how to paint. Nobody else in Gullport knows anything about it."

Peter bit his lip; even though Virginia was an old

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childhood friend, he knew nothing about her now, and he had confided too much for the first fifteen minutes of conversation. But Virginia looked at him with a curious gleam in her shadowy eyes.

"Then perhaps you'll understand," she said, with a low sigh.

"Understand what?" asked Peter, all afire with curiosity.

"Of course I'm glad to be back here," Virginia began. "It's my home, of course. And it's a joy to think that father can stay with us all the year round now—and I love Aunt Clarissa—and I was very, very glad to see Elsie again, and I'm looking forward to May and Katherine and Lucy—I've been writing letters to them all the time I've been away. Elsie came to the station with Aunt Clarissa this morning. Aunt didn't let your mother know after we arrived, because mother is too tired to see anyone till tonight; she isn't quite strong yet, you know, and the heat makes her tired."

"I'm sorry," said Peter, whose ardor for the beautiful lady of the garden had strangely taken flight and settled elsewhere. "But why—what did you mean when you said I might perhaps understand?"

"Yes, I was beginning," said Virginia, with some hesitation. "I was telling you how glad I was to see Elsie again. Well, I was very, very glad, but——"

"But what?" asked Peter, eagerly.

"Why, somehow she seemed different—" Virginia hesitated again.

"Different from what?" Peter encouraged her.

"Oh, different from my friends at school in Geneva," she said, quickly. "I suspected it, too, from Elsie's let-

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ters and from the others' letters, and from Aunt Clarissa's letters——”

“What were your friends in Geneva like?” asked Peter, shyly.

“Well, you see,” Virginia explained, “it was a great, big school, and there were pupils from England and from France and from Germany—and Americans, too, of course. Now, there were a lot of stupid people and a lot of silly ones, but my friends—perhaps, you'll thing I'm boasting, but I can't help it—my friends were the brightest of all, the—the most exciting.”

“I'm sure they were!” exclaimed Peter.

“We had a kind of circle—a club, you would call it, perhaps,” Virginia went on, “and we called it the Ring of the Muses, because we were nine, and we each had a talent.”

“Oh, you sing!” exclaimed Peter, who suddenly remembered one Christmas Eve, many years ago, when Virginia had been a little waif outside his window.

“Oh yes, I've always sung,” she replied. “And my best friend there, Yvonne, sang contralto, so that we could have duets, and another friend accompanied us. You can imagine what happy evenings we used to have! And there was one who wrote thrilling ballads and read them to us late at night, when the matron thought we were asleep—and one could paint—though you wouldn't have liked her pictures, probably—and one read aloud beautifully and moved us all to tears, and then . . . Well, I guess you don't care what my Muses can do, but I just wanted you to understand——”

“It must have been a wonderful company,” remarked Peter.

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"Oh, no, it wasn't wonderful," said Virginia, "only—perhaps you see now why Elsie seems so different. She doesn't seem to care about anything at all. I asked her if she kept up her painting, because I knew she used to like it with Miss Runkle, and she said, 'Oh, no; I haven't got the time for that.' And I asked her how she was spending her days in summer, and she said, 'Having a good time.' Her letters were always awfully nice and pleasant, you know, and so were Lucy's and Katherine's and May's, but there was never anything in them that—that was like Yvonne and my other Muses."

"You're right," said Peter, clearly aware, all at once, of what he had felt but vaguely till now. "Not one in Gullport, except Mr. Woodfin, really knows what's good. They're awfully nice and jolly, you know, but they don't care—whether a sunset is red or brown."

"So you say the same," returned Virginia, surprised. "And you have never been away!"

"I've never wanted to go away," Peter replied. "I like this old place too well. I've had the jolliest life—I never could have had the same good times in a big city, you know. Here there's the sea and the woods and all these gardens——"

"And yet——" Virginia suggested, slyly.

"No, it isn't that I ever wanted to go away," Peter declared. "I like them all awfully well—but, instead of leaving them, I'd rather make them see my way."

"Bravo!" cried Virginia, clapping her hands gaily. "Perhaps you'll be a seer some day—a kind of prophet."

Peter's cheeks were glowing with excitement; it was new to be believed in, and an inspiration.

"My father used to tell me the story of the young

Samuel," Peter began, thinking aloud, and then wondered suddenly why he had turned his discourse into this path. "And—he—he thought, because I was his only son——"

"He wanted you to be a prophet!" guessed Virginia.

"Yes," said Peter, "but a different kind from the one you mean."

"Aren't we having a grown-up conversation?" Virginia cried out suddenly, with a gay laugh. "But I like it."

"I was walking with Mr. Atherton before I came here," Peter told her. "He read me his poems on the sea."

"Oh, I remember him," replied Virginia, "with black, brilliant eyes and a very distinguished manner."

"Yes, that's Maurice Atherton," returned Peter. "He's very learned, but gay, too; and he isn't studious the way father is; for instance——"

"Oh, he was not like the others here," said Virginia.

"That's true," said Peter. "His eyes were made for seeing. But he doesn't belong to Gullport—he only comes once in a while."

"That's too bad!" exclaimed Virginia. "He might be a palm tree in the desert."

"Well, I'm glad I found you," Peter declared, a little roughly, because he was not used to making compliments. "You and I are both stranded on the same desert island, Virginia—that is a bond, isn't it?"

"Let's seal it!" said Virginia, and they shook hands solemnly.

Then all at once Virginia broke out into gay peals of laughter.

"Ungrateful ones we are!" she cried. "Look at our desert island! Isn't it a lovely one?"

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She pointed to the garden flowers as she spoke, and now rose merrily. Peter was a little dazed by her quick change to mirth from wistful contemplation.

"Come," she beckoned him, "I'll introduce you to Aunt Clarissa's flowers, one by one. I know them all very well. Aunt Clarissa always used to write about them, as if they were her best friends, and the first thing I did this morning was to make their acquaintance, and now they seem like old friends to me."

Virginia stepped carefully into the middle of the big, round flower-bed, fringed with small white alyssum, where all the old-fashioned flowers grew together, while Peter stayed at the outskirts, and, gliding from one flower to another, she gave Peter the name of each kind in turn. There were the snap-dragons with their quaint pouches of crimson and yellow, tall blue lupin and larkspur, and the sturdy orange marigold. Feathery cockscombs, like little dark, crimson trees, towered over the old rose mallows and blue petunias. Bushy phlox—crimson, purplish, rose and pure white—grew in profuse clusters, and sweet william, with its delicate, zigzag edges, and its ring of dark red on the white background of each little single blossom. Great, hearty zinnias, yellow and crimson and golden, stood like a stout bodyguard in front of the most fragrant company of all—the white and lavender and deep crimson gilly-flowers and green mignonettes that mingled their quaint, lovely scents.

"And this is love-in-a-mist," said Virginia, pointing to a single light blue blossom in a network of frail, feathery foliage. "These funny leaves are the mist, and the flower is love, I suppose."

Then she whisked on to the daintiest part of the gar-

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den, where, with light blue bachelor's buttons sprinkled among them, poppies were greeting Peter's eye—not the red poppies of his heart, but frail, breath-like white and pink poppies, and the California poppies with their low stems, silvery leaves and big, yellow blossoms.

"And now, this kind," she said, as if she had been leading up to a climax. "What do you suppose this is called?"

She picked up a fragile, long-stemmed poppy that seemed white silk, with a pink border painted by the most delicate brush.

"This is my namesake," she said; "it's name is Virginia."

"Virginia—" Peter repeated, aimlessly.

Virginia, her name, the poppy in her hand, the garden with its many-tinted flowers and mingled fragrance, all seemed to Peter like a tale of long ago. There was a drowsy silence.

"What's your favorite flower?" she asked, suddenly.

Peter started as if he were awaking from the blurred vision of a dream to another vision alive and bright: poppies, blood-red, glorious, were glowing all at once, and in their midst bright sunshine was streaming from the golden curls of a child.

"I'll tell you what my favorite flower is," he cried, in a fever of excitement, "even though it's my great secret. Poppies are my favorite flowers—not pale poppies, like these; but red, fiery, glowing poppies, like those I saw once——"

"When did you see them?" asked Virginia, eagerly.

"When I was six years old," replied Peter, "but I've always seen them since. They never leave me, even

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though they seem to for a time—they are the vision that leads me on—the vision I live for.”

“A vision of red poppies?” questioned Virginia, puzzled, but ardently curious.

“Yes,” said Peter, “a great sea of blood-red poppies and a child with golden curls in the midst of them, and strong, dazzling sunlight over all.”

“A child with golden curls,” repeated Virginia, as if she were trying to grasp the vision, too.

“Yes; you were the child!” said Peter.

“I!” cried Virginia, bewildered.

“Yes; it was at my grandmother’s long, long ago, and you were there, too, with your mother,” Peter explained. “But what difference does it make where it was or when it was or who it was? It is just my vision.”

“Your vision of red poppies,” said Virginia, pensively.

In the tense silence that followed, Peter felt as if he had betrayed someone, as if he had given away a secret too precious to lose.

“Peter,” said Virginia, in a strange tone that seemed like a whisper so secret, and yet like a trumpet-blast so inspired—“when you are a great artist, you must paint this vision for me—not till then, not till you can make it just as you are seeing it now—with the poppies just the same bright red—so that I can see your vision, too.”

“I will do that!” cried Peter. “I’ll hate myself if I don’t—I promise you I will—I’ll swear——”

“No, don’t swear,” interrupted Virginia, “perhaps you’ll never be great enough, or, perhaps——”

“Perhaps they won’t let me be an artist,” said Peter, defiantly. “But they shall—they must. You shall see my red poppies with your own eyes, and they shall bloom as

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flowers never bloomed before in your sight, and you shall never forget them as long as you live."

"Oh, Peter," cried Virginia, and in her eyes there was an ardent light.

The swinging of a door made them start, and when Peter turned round, he saw Miss Clarissa, the benign, white-haired lady, come slowly down the steps. Whether she had seen him or not Peter did not know nor care; he only knew that he wanted to escape commonplace chatting after his adventure with Virginia.

"Good-by," he cried, and fled out of the garden.

It was all clear to him now: he must go to art school. There must be no more doubt, no more playing with the idea of going to college, no more cowardly fear of offending his father. He would go to him without delay—now.

Peter found his father in the library. Because the heat was oppressive, he had closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the armchair, though he held an open book on his knee. At Peter's brisk entrance he started and opened his eyes.

"You here?" he said, blinking drowsily.

"Yes, father," said Peter mercilessly. "I've come to tell you something important."

Peter's father sat up erect and looked at his excited son with inquiring eyes.

"Father, I'm awfully sorry—" Peter began, stupidly.

He knew that his will was firm, and his conscience was clear, too—but his father's eyes were so dim and moist from too much pity.

"What are you sorry about?" the father asked. "What have you done?"

"I haven't done anything," answered Peter, "and I'm

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really not sorry about anything—except that you'll be disappointed. Oh, father, I wish you could understand—I wish you would see my way——”

“What is it?” asked his father, mystified and patient.

“You must know,” Peter cried out, “that I don't want to go to college!”

“Not go to college!” gasped his father, and Peter had never seen such wounded astonishment in any eyes before. “After you have passed all your examinations!”

“I only worked for those exams to please you,” said Peter. “I never cared about them all the time. And you know what I really care about—you know what I've always cared about, since I was nine years old; you know I want to study art!”

“I thought that was all happily over,” said Peter's father, hoarsely. “I supposed that a year of serious work had cured you of that idea.”

“Father, art isn't a disease to be cured of,” cried Peter, vibrating with excitement. “When I'm painting my mind is in its true health——”

“I don't mind your painting as a recreation,” his father interrupted mildly. “You know I have not hindered your taking lessons with Mr. Woodfin.”

All at once Peter realized that his painting lessons from his tenth year on had been a considerable expense, and that a long art education would be a burden to his father, a sacrifice for an aim of which he did not approve. The awkwardness of this state of affairs made Peter silent.

“I know it takes long to study art,” he began again, lamely, “and it would be a great expense—but so it would be to study law or medicine or divinity or any other

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line—" It seemed to Peter that he had said all this once before, several years ago; that he had already lived through this very moment at another time.

"If you spent your time on law or medicine or divinity," said his father, "or any other serious line of study, you would have a solid and serious profession at the end——"

"Why serious? Why solid?" cried Peter, in high excitement. "I should be a failure in every one of them. I should always want to break loose, and I should spend my time on painting anyway to the neglect of my profession, and my vocation, so called, would be my burden."

"I should have no objection," said Peter's father, with a sigh of resignation, "if you wanted to take up architecture."

That was a kind concession on his father's part, but Peter shook his head sadly.

"It isn't lines and construction that I care about," he tried to explain, "it's colors—only colors."

His father stared at Peter as if he had spoken in a foreign language.

"It doesn't seem right to me," said the father heavily, "that a man should base his life work on his liking for pretty colors."

"Pretty!" gasped Peter.

That word cut deep.

There was an abyss here between father and son, between the best of friends, an abyss over which there was no bridge, unless some rainbow, sprung from sunlight and clouds, should span it by a miracle.

"Perhaps you'll think it over," Peter said hoarsely, and went upstairs to his room.

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In the evening of the same day, when Peter met his mother in the hall before dinner, she took his hand furtively and said in her bird-like way:

"I'm so sorry, Peter; father told me. I know your heart is with your painting. But I'm sorry for father, too; you know how he has set all his hope and ambition on you!"

Peter could not help smiling. This was his mother as he knew her, as he had expected her to view his problem!

"It's too bad," he said, "but I can't give in now, just because father doesn't see my way."

The one question that absorbed father and mother and son was not mentioned again that night, nor for days afterwards, though each knew that the other was meditating on nothing else. During these days Peter avoided conversation with Dick and Harold, because their plans for college life became unbearable. Even Harold, who had failed in his examinations, was surer of his future than Peter, who had passed them all. Virginia he saw now and then, though never again alone, and when they met there was a secret understanding in their glances like the greeting of old friends who meet among strangers in a foreign land. Virginia's mother, the first beautiful lady of the garden, was even paler than when Peter had seen her last; her calm gray eyes were sadder, and her hair was now silver-gray. She spent many hours with Peter's mother on the piazza, and on shady parts of the beach, and Peter was sure that his mother had confided to her the problem of her son's career. Yet neither Mrs. Grey nor Virginia herself ever spoke to him about his future, and Peter did not want to see Virginia alone until he could

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announce that he was surely going along the path toward the glorious goal which she had pointed out in that inspired hour among the flowers.

But one morning Peter was stopped on the street by Virginia's stately father.

"I hear you don't want to go to college," he said in a jovial tone in which, however, Peter could hear a note of reproach.

"Oh, did Virginia tell you?" asked Peter, astonished.

"No, Mrs. Grey told me," he answered. "She said you wanted to be a painter. But let me give you a bit of advice, Peter: don't follow a romantic whim like that! Artists have hard times in this country, and many of them come near starving—and they haven't much compensation for their hardships. No, Peter, get a good, all-round college education first, and then, if you don't think that you were cut out for a learned profession, go into some solid business—you won't regret it. Of course, it isn't for me to direct your future, but as an old family friend I naturally take a live interest——"

"Thank you—you're very good," stammered Peter. "I'll have to think about it."

Mr. Grey had to hurry on to his factory, and left Peter standing still on the sidewalk, with a dull pain in his heart. It made him sad to think that Virginia's father, like his father, should be looking at his life with eyes so different from Virginia's and his own.

To Mr. Woodfin only Peter could talk unchecked of his troubles while they worked together like old colleagues.

"I told your father—the other day when I met him on the street—that he ought to send you to art school right

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off," said the hermit of the woods. "But I can't help you; he wouldn't listen to an old painter like me."

"There isn't another man in Gullport who knows anything about it," said Peter with a sigh.

"It isn't so hard on a father, either," Mr. Woodfin went on. "Now, my son Jack has just won a prize in Paris."

Rarely as Mr. Woodfin mentioned his son, he always spoke of him with pride, for Jack Woodfin had begun to have a good reputation abroad. Peter remembered the painter's son, who had visited his father occasionally in the summers some years ago, as a great jovial fellow, rough like his father, but without a trace of the hermit. It was so simple for Jack Woodfin to be a painter and at the same time his father's pride; why could not Peter be the same?

As his teacher's advice was fruitless with his father, Peter returned to his last and strongest resource. He inquired of Harold in a casual way when his mother was going to invite Mr. Atherton again, and then he lived for days in anticipation of Mrs. Montague's week-end party. On the day of the philosopher's arrival, Peter called at Mira Mare and asked for Mr. Atherton alone. Then he simply stated his case, and asked Mr. Atherton to persuade his father.

"For, if you can't convince him," said Peter, "then I'll have no more hope."

"If it's as bad as that," his older friend replied, "I must see what I can do. I shall call on him this afternoon; in the meantime, I shall think up all the arguments I can. We must convince him at last."

"Oh, you are awfully good!" cried Peter eagerly.

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"Don't thank me yet," said Mr. Atherton, "I may fail."

"I don't believe you have ever failed," said Peter earnestly, "and I don't see why you should now."

Peter walked home—no, he ran and skipped, as in his childhood days—with a heart rashly light, considering that nothing had yet been accomplished. But there was calm, mysterious force in every gesture, every glance of Maurice Atherton's that his father would not be able to resist.

"What makes you so cheerful?" asked Peter's mother, at home. "Are you going somewhere especially gay this afternoon?"

"No," answered Peter, "I am going to stay in my room and stretch canvases and clean my palette."

These occupations were but an excuse to watch undisturbed at his window for Mr. Atherton's approach, and to measure the length of his visit. At last, at three o'clock, Mr. Atherton came: the bell rang shrilly through the house; Lizzy opened the door——

Peter's whole life's course hung on this call. He could not hear their voices, but he could picture his father gazing with dim, puzzled eyes at his eloquent caller; he could picture the light, ironic play about Maurice Atherton's lips and the mysterious gleam in his eyes.

The clock struck four, and still they were talking downstairs: it seemed that Peter's father was hard to persuade, or perhaps Mr. Atherton had talked for a long while on something else before he led up deftly to the all-important topic.

The silence that enveloped Peter was uncanny when so much was being said, unheard by him, that was significant. Now there were voices in the hall—his mother's,

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too. Now Mr. Atherton came out of the house, walked down the path to the gate—turned round again, raised his hat and hurried out of sight. It was over. But what was the outcome?

A sudden reserve came over Peter. He did not want to run down in an undignified way, and ask if Mr. Atherton had turned the balance in his favor. Though it was a question of life or—as it seemed to Peter in this moment—of death in life, he would not ask it now.

How the minutes of the old, slow clock were dragging! How sluggish and oppressive the air was today! What foreboding silence! Did nobody want him——

Footsteps on the stairs—a rustle of skirts——

“Peter!”

That was his mother’s voice. He opened the door and his mother fluttered in eagerly, while tears were glistening in her eyes.

“Peter!” she said in a quivering voice, and laid one arm round his shoulders, “your father has consented. I’m so happy for you, my boy.”

“Hurrah!” cried Peter, and embraced his mother stormily. He could have embraced the whole earth in that moment and flung his arms round the moon.

He made a bound toward the door, but his mother held him back.

“Wait till I’ve told you how it happened,” she said, and sat down by the window.

“Your father called me in,” said Peter’s mother, “and there I found Mr. Atherton telling him that he ought to let you study art. It wouldn’t be right, he said, to add one more mediocre lawyer or doctor to the many in the country, when he might be giving it a good artist——

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that this country needed artists more than anything else. Oh, he said many things—that artists were happier in their profession than other people, that they belonged to a sort of higher order of humanity. . . . He talked so beautifully and in such a convincing way that your father, moved at last, said you might enter the Boston Art School this fall, and so—and——”

Peter did not stop to hear the end of his mother's tale, but bounded downstairs and straight into the library. There his father sat by the window, absently brooding.

In that moment the full measure of his happiness flooded Peter's heart, and all at once there flashed before him the fiery sea of bright red poppies glowing in the sunshine that played on the gleaming golden locks of a child.

“Father!” exclaimed Peter, jubilantly, “perhaps some day you will see my vision, too.”

Peter's father turned round, startled.

“What vision?” he gasped, and looked at Peter as if he were mad—looked at him steadily with dim eyes, moist from pity.

But Peter cried in an ecstasy of joy:

“Red poppies!”

CHAPTER VI

THE STUDY IN GREEN AND BLUE

S**I**X years later, Peter's mother introduced him one day with a proud tremor in her voice:

"This is my son, just come back from Paris. He studied in the Boston Art School five years, you know, and then went to Paris."

And it was natural for her to be proud as she thus presented him to the lady who was calling on her with Mrs. Montague, for no other parent in the little town of Gullport had a son coming home from Paris: other sons came home from college, from law school or at most from the West, and no one went abroad except on a vacation.

"Oh, how do you do, Mr. Loring!" gushed Mrs. Odiorne, the friend of Mrs. Montague. "I suppose you have been leading a gay artist's life."

"Oh, no indeed," said Peter who had been asked the same question three times on that same day. "I've been doing hard work with little time left for gaiety. Some day, when I'm not slaving any more, I want to go back to Paris and be gay."

"Not too soon, we hope," said Peter's mother who seemed to move in a radiance ever since he had come home three days ago. "Five years in Boston at Art

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School and a year abroad is a long time away for an only son."

"Ah, but your son comes home dutifully in vacation," said Mrs. Montague with a mock sigh. "But think of Harold who barely pops his head in at his mother's door, when he flits off again to a house-party or a cruise or a camp in the wilds. His mother is not attraction enough."

It occurred to Peter now that he had not seen Harold more than three or four fleeting times in a summer during the long vacations; that, in fact, he had lost contact with his old schoolmate. And so it had happened, too, that he had scarcely set his foot on the threshold of Mira Mare, and Mrs. Montague seemed like a glittering stranger within his house. Was this indeed the woman toward whom he had felt hostile throughout his childhood, from whom he had shrunk as from a green, insidious snake? How queer, he thought, were the judgments of children! There was something in the haughty curve of Mrs. Montague's profile that reminded him uncannily of the Russian sculptress whom he used to meet with Chabrier, his colleague, at the little café near Notre Dame. Oh, Cécile's eyes were wistful and gray and Mrs. Montague's green and cold like the sea on a calm summer day, and Mrs. Montague was the *grande dame* whereas poor Cécile was a child of Bohème. . . . But there lurked in Mrs. Montague's face as in Cécile's something that made him wonder and guess at secrets and hidden bitterness, as one might guess at dark seaweed stirring at the bottom of an opaque and shadowy rock-pool. There was little to wonder at in most of the faces in Gullport, little to drive a paint-brush

into his hand for a chase after the will-o'-the-wisp soul.

"Show me some of your studies, Mr. Loring," said Mrs. Montague. "You know my one passion. My eye is always on the alert for the youngest genius."

"How hard for the next to youngest!" said Peter, happy in Mrs. Montague's attention. This green-eyed enemy of his childhood, who had noticed him no more than she was heeding the spider on her lace sleeve this minute, who had never cast a glance at his eager painting in the very shadow of her house, summer after summer, now was the first visitor at home who wanted to see his work. Could it be simply because he had studied a year in Paris that she looked upon him as worthy of her notice?

"Oh, do let me see them too!" exclaimed the pug-nosed, smug-faced Mrs. Odiorne. "I am very much interested in art."

Peter was not in a mood to spread out the studies that he had painted in the sweat of his brow before Mrs. Odiorne; but Mrs. Montague's exacting glance he could not refuse. So he took his precious portfolio out of his room and threw one canvas after the other on to the parlor floor so that the ladies looked down on a carpet of painted figures and faces.

Mrs. Montague whisked up her lorgnette and looked down with sharp studiousness.

"That's the best," she remarked at last, pointing with her parasol at a portrait study of his favorite model, a gaunt boy with high cheek-bones and hungry eyes.

"I think it's the best, too," said Peter with a sudden joy.

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"This is good, too," Mrs. Montague went on, pointing at a girl in a peasant dress. "The posture is a little wooden, though, and the right arm is a trifle stiff—don't you think so?"

She looked at him with a masterful smile as if she would say: "My eye is infallible; I know what is good!"

"I do think so," said Peter. "And I think you are a connoisseur."

Mrs. Montague fixed her green eyes on Peter.

"I want to hear what you think of a little genre picture I have just bought, by Francis Greenleaf. It's curious, it's—well, I want to hear your opinion first. Come to see it some afternoon—and me too, incidentally, Mr. Loring."

Harold's mother had asked him, Peter, to call on her! Strange, strange world, so transformed by one year abroad! And he was Mr. Loring now and worthy of her cool, enigmatic smiles, he who as Peter, the insignificant friend of Harold's had played on her veranda!

When Mrs. Montague had glided out of the house, followed by the smiling and bowing Mrs. Odiorne, it seemed to Peter as if she had left behind an aroma inhaled by a sixth sense, a fragrance of sharp spice such as had whiffed by him in the old world and he had missed on his return. The little green feather on her hat made him homesick for Paris.

Only for a moment this wave overwhelmed his spirit. Then he stepped out on to the porch and breathed in the sea-air and the warm cheering scent of hay: welcome breaths of home! The peonies were in full bloom in the garden and the grass, the leaves on the apple tree and

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the hedges, were green with a young and rain-washed hue. Peter was ardently aware, all at once, that he belonged here, on this very spot, as nowhere else in the wide world; he was reminded of the giant in Greek fable who lost strength when his foot was not touching Mother Earth; it seemed to him now that if an Archangel should offer him Paris with its treasures, its history, its allurements in one hand and his home town in the other, he would refuse Paris with a shrug of his shoulders and greedily snatch his native soil.

There was Peter's father strolling down the street, with his hat off to let the mild breeze play in his gray hair and gazing round with a timid look of joy.

"We must tell father about Mrs. Montague," said Peter's mother, stepping up behind him.

And as they all lingered on the porch in the wicker chairs, Peter's mother told his father about Mrs. Montague's approval of Peter's work.

"And she isn't easily impressed, you know," she added eagerly.

"I guess Mrs. Montague is the only one who can judge painting here," said Peter's father wistfully.

It seemed to Peter that his father was just a little proud of him after all, because he had won a students' prize in Paris and because his teacher M. Sardot had praised his work, but there was still an air of doubt and wonder when his father spoke of painting as if it were a necromantic art.

"When the Greys come back in the fall," said Peter's mother, "they will be interested. Eleanor Grey has acquired a great taste for art abroad. I don't know about Virginia."

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"I do," said Peter. "Virginia has an artist's eye."

"Let me see," pondered Peter's mother. "How long ago is it that we saw them last?"

"Oh, I haven't seen Virginia since she was sixteen," Peter replied. "Except for those hurried three weeks two summers ago . . . They didn't turn up in Paris, after all."

Peter thought of evenings in Paris when long shadows would fall on his drawings, and his roaming fancy would make Virginia knock at the door of his dreary little room and step in with gay laughter. If he had not been a dutiful, slaving art student feeding on pocket-money from his father, he would have flown to Italy and swooped down on Virginia instead of waiting for her to visit him in dreams.

"I do hope they are really going to stay here now," said Peter's mother. "This wandering life can't be very good for Virginia. The whole last winter in Davos—think how dreary for a young child!"

If Virginia were only coming back in June to help him over these summer months of deciding where to go, of waiting for some illuminating sign that should point out the right course for him to take! Perhaps, to be sure, if Virginia should come back now after her long sojourn abroad, they would find each other strangers and it was folly to feed his fancy on children's caprices. But, after all, the hour in Miss Clarissa's garden was a bond that could not be broken!

"Peter, where are you?" his mother broke into his meditation. "There's Elsie Robins bowing to you across the street, and you aren't even looking!"

"Dear me!" exclaimed Peter, bowing back to a group

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of muslin apparitions. "I had quite forgotten her existence!"

"That's not kind of you," said his mother. "They say Dick is growing more and more devoted to her every day."

"Poor Dick!" sighed Peter.

"Poor Dick!" repeated his mother, astonished. "Why poor? There isn't another soul in Gullport who would say 'poor Dick'!"

Peter wished that he had been more discreet: how could he explain this sudden wave of pity for the smug bourgeois life of a doctor in a small town?

"Well," he began. "He has two more long years of medical school—and then he'll probably just stay round here . . . there's no more adventurer's blood in him now . . . I guess he'll follow his father's footsteps and help doctor our town."

"A very good useful life that is," said Peter's father with the mild undertone of reproach that Peter knew well.

"Dick missed you so at Christmas and in the spring vacation," said Peter's mother, no doubt scenting the wistful flutter in the air. "I hope you'll see a great deal of him this summer."

"I'll go this minute," said Peter, "and have a game of tennis before dark."

Dick! As Peter sauntered down the street in his tennis shoes, swinging his racket, it seemed as if he were ten years old, going to romp with his playmate. They were going to play together, and talk about play and fun for the next day and the gossip of the town. And it was the same with Ted Raffles and Timothy

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Simpkins and the others—all except Red Mike who was working out West—as Peter had found out in the first three days at home: they were all jolly good friends and played and joked as in school days, but they never guessed or cared what force drove him and his colleagues in Paris to the master's studio in the gray of early morning and kindled fire in their eyes as they disputed over their ruby-red Chianti in the little Italian inn. Those in Paris were his colleagues who never cared whence he came or who his kin might be, asking only if his goal were theirs; these here were his friends and asked for no more ethereal bond than a common childhood and a common home.

Peter was roused by a gruff familiar voice from across the street. Whom could Mr. Woodfin be talking to—he who always walked alone and seldom on a street? A great, broad-shouldered fellow with a rough brown moustache and a rollicking gait was talking in a loud penetrating voice to the painter. Peter crossed the road and came upon them.

"Here's my son Jack!" said Mr. Woodfin with a glow of pride.

To be sure, that was Jack Woodfin, only broader, ruddier and more swaggering than when Peter had seen him last, four or five years ago.

"Well, I'm glad to find one of my sort," exclaimed Jack Woodfin, shaking hands heartily with Peter. "I'm a black sheep here."

"Have you brought any of your work?" asked Peter eagerly.

"Only three or four things," Jack Woodfin replied. "To show the old man."

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"Come and see them," said his father. "They're worth looking at."

When father and son had passed by, it occurred to Peter that this was the first invitation to his old teacher's home that he had ever received, and besides it seemed as if the painter's rough face had been transfigured. He was proud of his son! When would Peter's father be proud of his son—or rather, would he ever be proud of his son, even if Peter won all the gold medals in the world? His meditations were cut off by Dick's jovial voice:

"Hallo, old chap! Glad you've come!"

And as he entered the gate of the Taylors' yard, Peter left behind him all cares and doubts and entered the green land of boyhood where a life work was of no moment and only play mattered at all.

In this happy land Peter gamboled for the rest of the week and it seemed to him as if he might play tennis and swim and sail to the end of his life, if only the summer would last forever.

But the time would come when the laughing days would grow shorter and leaves would fall and Peter would be a stray artist not knowing whither to turn—so he reflected on a gray day as he watched the fine drizzling rain from his window.

"Peter, Peter!" the rain seemed to mutter on the roof. "Where will you be three months from now, Peter?"

He would go to the Woodfins today and at least hear about work and feel where he belonged.

The walk along the woods in the monotonous rain to Mr. Woodfin's cottage seemed like a walk from one world into another. The rain dripped from the leaves

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of the beeches as he entered the wood and a faint wind made them rustle; all else was calm.

Peter knocked with the knocker on the door of the cottage, and when a deep voice had bidden him enter, he stepped into the hall where father and son were sitting opposite each other, smoking their pipes and musing before a blazing open fire.

"Peter!" cried the older artist. "Welcome this dull day! Come and cheer up a stupid family."

"Stupid!" repeated Jack Woodfin, as he drew up a chair to the fire for Peter. "It's been lively up to the last five minutes. I've been trying to persuade father to come with me to Munich, and he was thinking it over and just on the point of accepting when you came in——"

Mr. Woodfin senior started up.

"I never thought for a moment of going there," he protested sullenly. "What should I do in a foreign country, where I don't even know the language? I'm too old to be a vagabond like Jack."

"Only life for an artist!" declared Jack Woodfin gaily, as he tossed a mighty log into the fire. "You must come, Loring, of course. Munich's the only place for you. You've had Paris now. You'll have a happier life in Munich than in New York."

"I hadn't thought of going to New York particularly," said Peter blandly.

"Man!" cried Jack Woodfin. "You aren't going to stay here in New England!"

"Why not?" said Peter helplessly. "I haven't decided yet where I'll go."

"Whatever you do," said the young painter, "don't

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stay in this our dear Gullport. I never feel a stranger anywhere except when I come back here and walk on the prim little streets in the home of my youth, and everybody turns and stares at me as if I were a highwayman."

"You've been away so long," said Peter, wondering if some day he would have to come home a stranger to his home town.

"You have a nice way of talking to your host, Jack," said the older Mr. Woodfin. "And its rarely enough that you honor me."

"I'm not talking about your hermitage," returned his son. "This is the most blessed spot on earth—isn't it, Loring?"

Peter assented and looked round: the hall where they were sprawling round the fire was at the same time living-room and studio. Three easels stood round with sketches on them—studies of cliffs, reflections on sand—and canvases lay heaped up in every corner; pipes, palettes, mahlsticks were strewn about; the only vase was a tall copper goblet holding paint-brushes instead of flowers; the curtain that separated the hall from the little dining-room beyond was a great fisherman's net. But on the wall opposite the big window hung a glorious painting of surf in a rainstorm, and over the fireplace a portrait of Jack Woodfin's mother. This was the first time that Peter had been offered a chair in the house of his teacher who had never invited him to linger when Peter had come to make plans for sketching excursions. Perhaps the painter wanted to keep his cottage a sanctuary for the picture of his wife; perhaps he did not want to break the spell of his hermit's way

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of living; perhaps he merely did not want an outsider to pry upon the disorder of his studio.

"You must have a fine time painting here in winter," said Peter, looking enviously at the big window.

"Well," said the older Mr. Woodfin hoarsely, "I've worked in here for thirty-five years and don't intend to work anywhere else."

"I'll grant that father has a right to stay here if he insists," said Jack Woodfin to Peter. "But for you it would be wrong and foolish."

"As bad as that?" said Peter anxiously, for he felt suddenly as if someone were pulling him up, like an ivy plant by many tender little roots, from his dear native soil.

"I mean it," said the young painter. "You'll never get any thanks for your work here. Even if they buy your pictures, if you happen to be fashionable—I mean in Boston, of course, not in this dear town—well, even if they do buy your pictures, they won't care about them any more than they do for embroidered sofa cushions."

Peter was silent.

"But in Munich," Jack Woodfin continued, "in Munich they love, live—breathe art. Munich is art. In Munich, whether you sell your pictures or not, everybody knows why you're painting them."

The ardent fire in his dark eyes changed all at once into a jolly sparkle. "And the fun you can have in Munich—why, there's nothing like it here. The nights at the café . . . Carnival . . . costume balls and studio revels . . ."

"Everything that I might have had in Paris," said

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Peter, while his pulse began to beat faster, "if I hadn't slaved so."

"You couldn't have had the same time in Paris," said Jack Woodfin. "They're especial Munich times. But you haven't lost your chance. Make up your mind now, and come back with me this fall."

"He would have to ask his father first," said Mr. Woodfin.

In that moment Peter wished that he were independent, a gay vagabond like Jack Woodfin, instead of a beginner feeding out of his father's hand.

"Show me some of your work!" he said abruptly, turning to Jack Woodfin. "Let me see what Munich can do!"

Without hesitation young Woodfin plunged into a dark place beneath the stairs and brought out an armful of canvases, which he held into the light, one by one, for Peter's benefit.

"Oh!" gasped Peter at the sight of the first one, a sketch of a laughing boy, a ragamuffin with a bare, brown neck and straggly black hair falling over his irresistibly mischievous eyes. There was something like a brisk wind about this sketch, something gay, reckless, dashing that shot a pang of honest admiration—and envy, too—through Peter's heart. And the other sketches all had the magic of the first and made Peter speechless.

"Have you had enough?" asked the young artist, laughing as he held up a portrait of himself with his palette and pipe.

"No, go on, go on!" said Peter, and when the exhibition was over, he drew a deep sigh and declared:

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"There must be something in Munich, after all."

Jack Woodfin laughed boisterously.

"You'll go there yet," he cried. "If not now, some time, surely."

It was with a heavy heart and at the same time a curiously elated spirit that Peter left his friends of the hermitage to tramp in the dreary rain to the land that knew no painters. How could he ever suggest Munich to his father and mother, now that he had barely returned from Paris? His mother would cry because he wanted to go away so far again; his father would be astonished at his audacity. Peter wondered how his father and mother happened to have such a rebellious son when they might as well have had a dutiful, normal one like Dick, willing to take up his father's profession and stay in his home town for the rest of his days. And yet Peter's life at home, since his return from Paris, had been as peaceful and happy as it had been when he was ten years old.

During the bright, sunny days that followed, Peter never spoke at home of his visit to the hermitage, and frolicked with Dick and Ted Raffles, when all the while a great question mark was branding his heart. Peter knew that he must begin to work again, that it was a sin of omission to waste the golden summer days in play when sparkling blues and rich greens and sunset gleams of crimson and purple were clamoring to be held fast on canvas. For as Peter had always sketched in the summer, since the days of Miss Runkle, he could not understand why this summer it should be so hard to begin; perhaps in Paris he had grown too used to colleagues, to shop talk.

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It was on a dazzling afternoon, when he was strolling about Green Shore all alone, that Peter remembered Mrs. Montague's invitation to see her new acquisition. Why not go now? Harold was away at a house-party, and so would not laugh at him for suddenly making a formal call on his mother. And Harold's father was away for always, because, as Peter's mother had told him, the Montagues had at last been divorced for "incompatibility of temper." And, though tongues wagged with malicious gossip, it seemed small wonder to Peter that they should have been ill-mated, as a full-blood steed and a mule cannot be yoked together.

Peter's heart beat as he walked up the steep stairway to the high veranda of Mira Mare, as if he had never played there at hide-and-seek and marbles.

"Is Mrs. Montague in?" That was a question he had surely never asked before.

In the drawing-room hung the charming airy landscapes that Peter had admired since his boyhood, graceful vases stood about, holding roses, and the rugs that he walked on had delicate designs in purplish gray. The famous view of the sea that he had seen countless times from the veranda startled him, as he saw it now, framed by the window.

"Mira Mare!" he said to himself, aloud.

"Oh, Mr. Loring!" a crisp metallic voice startled him out of his reverie. "Why are you calling the name of my house? Is it for a blessing or for a curse?"

"A blessing for me, Mrs. Montague," said Peter, and started as he remembered that this was Harold's mother, from whom he used to hide when he had come to play.

"You want to see my little Greenleaf," said Mrs.

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Montague. "I am so fond of it, I have hung it in my own little boudoir. Come, I'll show you. . . ."

Peter followed her through the adjoining rooms to a retreat that, small, dainty, held a divan covered with a fantastically embroidered scarf and a desk and graceful chairs of light maple wood. Over the divan, on the pale wallpaper, hung a small painting in delicate tints, of nymphs with fluttering veils and gauzy garments dancing on a dewy field in the mist.

"What do you think of it?" asked Mrs. Montague.

"Excellent!" said Peter, and found himself wondering if the painter of this picture were a special protégé of Mrs. Montague's.

"Greenleaf is an old man, now," said his hostess. "This is one of his earlier works."

"I thought I had heard about all the younger men," said Peter, with a mysterious sense of relief. After all, the painting, though it had great charm, did not impress Peter like Jack Woodfin's work, and it did not seem to him very modern.

"I am interested in the young men," said Mrs. Montague, as she led Peter out onto the veranda by an arras-door from the boudoir. A light breeze played with the frail fabric of her pale green gown, and the dazzling sunlight sparkled on the diamonds at her ears. Her neck seemed to him in this moment very white and swan-like, and her haughty profile rare and queenly; if he only had palette, brush and canvas here this minute before the perfect pose should be spoiled by a hair-breadth's turning of the neck!

"You know," began the model of his imagination, "my sister has been urging me for a long time to have my portrait painted."

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The blood fled from Peter's cheeks as if sucked out by a demoniac force: had she read in his ardent look that he was longing to paint her portrait and had she spoken only to mock him? The silence was awkward, and he knew that he must make some polite remark.

"You're a fine subject!" he exclaimed honestly; but he would have liked to compliment his queenly hostess more brilliantly. Altogether he felt like a clumsy boy.

They sat down on the breezy side of the veranda, and looked out over the dazzling blue.

"Artists think I'm an easy subject," said Mrs. Montague lightly. "But they soon find out, when they're working at me, that I'm very hard to do—especially my eyes."

She turned her sea-green, mocking, cold yet absorbing eyes upon him, and it seemed to Peter that to catch their gleam and meaning was indeed a Herculean task.

"I thought of asking Greenleaf," Mrs. Montague continued, and these words annoyed Peter. "Of course, he has a great charm—your friend, Mr. Atherton, thinks so too."

Maurice Atherton, to be sure! Peter had not seen the philosopher for two years, the year that he had taken a leave of absence to work in Oxford, and the year that Peter himself had spent in Paris. And now all at once he understood what had always puzzled him as a boy—why Mr. Atherton chose to be the guest of Mrs. Montague.

"But, you see," Peter's hostess went on, as he made no reply, "Greenleaf is growing old, and although he paints wood-nymphs with great delicacy—yet, you will admit, I'm no wood-nymph."

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"No, you're a sea-nymph," said Peter, and then started, as he remembered that he was talking with an acquaintance of his mother's whom he had always shunned.

But Mrs. Montague laughed a short, cool, mocking laugh.

"Should you like to try?" she asked, abruptly. "You know I always favor youth."

Was the wide ocean spinning round Peter with myriads of dazzling ripples, that he should have grown dizzy all at once, as if he had been dancing too long? Had he heard real words, or only the murmuring of the tide on the pebbles below?

"Do you mean," he stammered, "do you mean that I shall paint your portrait?"

"If you want to," Mrs. Montague answered, with an ironic smile.

Peter rose in his excitement, as if he were setting out on an adventure.

"When do you want me to start?" he cried.

"Any time, soon," she replied, gracefully shrugging her shoulders. "While the sunshine lasts, I thought I should like to be done on the veranda with the sea as background."

"Tomorrow!" cried Peter, eagerly, for it seemed as if he could not wait so long.

"Oh, you are zealous!" exclaimed Mrs. Montague, with a gesture of protest. "Next week will be time enough. Suppose we say next week—Monday. Then, perhaps, you'll come round some morning this week, and we'll decide on the gown——"

"A study in green and blue!" Peter declared. "That's what I should like to make it."

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"I see you have ideas of your own," said Mrs. Montague, with an indulgent smile. "I hope, though, that you won't be so engrossed in your harmonic color scheme that you'll forget to consider the likeness."

"Oh, no, no!" declared Peter. "The colors would only help to bring out your most real self."

"That sounds very ambitious," laughed his model-to-be, and rose as a sign for Peter, who was already standing, to take his leave.

When Peter took her cool hand as he said good-by, he felt as if he were holding the hand of a prophetess who had marked out his path. Whatever might happen afterwards, this was the first order that he had received in his life—and what an order it was!

Peter's mother was not a little flattered by the news, and even his father was pleased; an order for a portrait so near at home, so respectable, so altogether satisfactory, could not but gratify them both. And Peter lived in a delirium, counting the slothful days that separated him from his task, painting a glittering picture in his mind. When Jack Woodfin, whom he met in the harbor, asked him to go on a short sketching cruise with him and his father, Peter refused, as casually as possible, because he was making preparations for a portrait of Mrs. Montague, whereupon Jack Woodfin congratulated him with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

"You're a lucky dog!" he said, "to fish the only order to be had in this nest. But can't you go sketching just the same—or is she going to pose every day?"

"Twice a week," said Peter. "I'll go sketching with you in between the sittings."

"Don't let her boss you too much," Jack Woodfin called

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after Peter, as he passed on. "Don't forget to do what you want to do, even if you don't flatter."

In that moment his colleague's patronizing tone annoyed Peter a little, as, indeed, everything annoyed him except the ideal portrait in his mind.

At last the day dawned. It was a dazzling, auspicious day, with white, feathery clouds on a bright sky. The hours crawling toward the appointed time Peter spent in an idle review of his tools, and when at last he found himself, laden with paint-box and easel, tramping across the causeway from Gullport to Green Shore, it seemed as if he were walking across the causeway from his old life to his new. He was now no longer a student, he now would stand with his foot in the real world—even though this real world was manifest in Green Shore, the playground of his boyhood!

Half an hour later he stood in front of his easel on the veranda of Mira Mare, fixing his eyes on his model. Mrs. Montague was reclining languidly in a wicker chair, one foot on a footstool, one elbow resting on the arm of the chair; one slender, nervous hand was playing with a long chain of jade in her lap. The sea in the background was a gleaming, piercing blue, the sky purest turquoise, the dress that fell in gauzy folds a pale, cool green.

"A study in blue and green, eh?" said the model, in her mocking voice.

"Yes," replied Peter; "now I must catch you just the way I see you this moment——"

"I am not running away," she returned; "you look as if I were; I am sitting painfully still."

"Yes," said Peter, but could talk no more; so feverish was his haste in laying the foundation to this work, that

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he was breathless, as if he were running a race. Oh, if the charcoal drawing were only done, so that he might begin to paint!

"Don't turn—this way—no, to the right—that's it!" He forgot that the glittering model before him was an older lady, a friend of his mother's, and not a model in his master's studio.

"Raise the left hand a little—stop—no more!"

"You're a despotic painter," said Mrs. Montague, "and ferociously silent. I have been looking forward to a little gossip of artists and Paris."

"Wait till I get to your eyes," answered Peter, "then it will be good to have you talk——"

"That's polite!" exclaimed Mrs. Montague, and broke out into gay laughter.

"I don't care if I'm polite or not," said Peter. "I don't care about anything in the world except this picture."

"What an inspired young Leonardo!" his model remarked, with a smile of irony.

The name of Leonardo shot through Peter like a strong current and seemed to kindle his hands with a fiery swiftness. Was he not painting his enigmatic Mona Lisa?

The tide murmured below, the tide rose from low tide to high tide and covered the boulders on the beach, yet Peter heard nothing and saw nothing but his model in green and her background of blue.

"Why, my dear, still patience on a monument"—a shrill voice broke into the quiet. "How do you do, Pet—Mr. Loring, I should say."

It was Harold's Aunt Hettie who came swooping down on them.

"Well, let me see what you have done so far."

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"Don't—don't look yet," cried Peter: "It's only just barely begun. You mustn't look!"

The lank, august Aunt Hettie seemed startled by his ardor, and indicated by the raising of her eyebrows that his tone was not quite correct.

"At any rate, you will let my sister rest, I trust," she said, turning away from the easel. "It is almost one o'clock."

"I've been martyr to the cause of my own beauty," said Mrs. Montague, rising with a sigh and stretching her arms.

"I hope we can go on tomorrow at the same time," said Peter. "The light wouldn't be the same this afternoon."

"Man!" cried his model. "This afternoon! What are you thinking of? You know, I promised you only two mornings a week!"

Peter hung his head. He wondered what Mrs. Montague had to do in her mornings that was half as important or alluring as to sit in the sunlight and be a dazzling study in green and blue. But there was no help, and the canvas, as yet but crudely covered with the work of his feverish hands, had to be stowed away in a secret recess in the hall of Mira Mare. Peter declined an invitation to stay for luncheon—he scarcely knew why: perhaps because he did not want to talk with Harold's Aunt Hettie on indifferent topics, or because he could not bear to see his model torn from her harmonizing background.

"I have faith in your brush!" were Mrs. Montague's parting words in a serious tone, though her eyes were still mocking, as she looked down at him from the high veranda of Mira Mare.

From that moment Peter lived in a kind of stupor, his

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mind one sparkling field of green and blue, and when he was looking at his mother or Dick or Dr. Taylor or Ted Raffles or a fisherman on the street, he was all the while seeing only the one rare, sharp face in half profile, only one pair of cool, green eyes with secrets in their depths.

The next sitting was even more absorbing than the first, though he felt more at ease, and the third was the most intense of all. For he had now reached the point when he had to hold fast the flickering gleam in those green eyes, and try to guess their meaning. Mrs. Montague gossiped about artists in Paris and New York, and as she spoke lightly of one after the other, her narrow, haughty lips curled in irony.

"Gorton—Oh, yes, I knew him when he was a young man," she was saying of an exhibitor at the Salon. "His things are clever enough, but rather too brisk, too exuberant, like someone who talks too fast—don't you think so? And he certainly makes all his women's necks an inch too thick."

Peter looked at the neck on his canvas and then at his model's, and saw to his satisfaction that he had missed none of its grace and slenderness. But the eyes—the eyes were his despair! Why was she always censuring or mocking, so that he could never penetrate to the bottom of those green pools?

"I wonder if Harold will like your picture," said Peter, a few minutes later, thinking aloud.

He glanced up at his model and saw that curious, dark shadows troubled the lucid pools of her eyes.

"He will think it flattering of his old mother," she said gaily, and the shadows in her eyes fled before a gleam of bitter sarcasm.

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Did she dislike to talk about her son? Peter remembered now that Harold from his earliest childhood had spoken with resignation of "the Mater," and that in his college years he had rarely stayed more than three weeks at home. Peter thought of his own mother, who talked of nothing with so much relish as her son, and for the first time he seemed to feel again the uncanny presence of a green serpent that had chilled him so often in his boyhood, when Harold's mother had come near. Moreover, he knew that Harold's mysterious house-parties were often no house-parties at all, but yachting trips with his dull, silent father.

A new idea leaped into Peter's mind: if he should speak of Mrs. Montague's divorced husband and rouse bitter memories in her mind, would he at last be able to read the whole meaning of her enigmatic face—that hieroglyphic scroll given him to interpret? But no! Rather would he stay puzzled than risk this proud lady's displeasure!

At the end of the sitting, when Peter stepped back to take a critical view of his morning's work, he was startled to find how remote he was still from his goal.

While he was staring at the canvas, disappointed and impatient at the slow work of his pace, he was aware of Mrs. Montague standing behind him; he fancied that he heard her breath in the silence.

"Why so grave?" she asked, in a voice that was milder and more endearing than usual.

"It's such difficult work," said Peter. "I'm not satisfied."

Again there was silence, and strangely the breathing beside him seemed louder than the murmur of the sea.

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There was something myterious about this breathing, something that made his own breath come and go with unwonted swiftness. He did not turn round, but bent over the picture to retouch a line on the chin. All at once he felt something like the touch of a butterfly on his forehead. . . . But the butterfly did not flit away: a kiss was burning on Peter's brow!

"A kiss of the Muse!" said Mrs. Montague playfully, with a light of triumph in her cold eyes. "You must not lose faith in her so soon."

Peter gazed at Mrs. Montague, his mother's acquaintance and Harold's mother; he gazed, and clumsy boor that he was, he did not know what to do. But a current had shot through him and he was vibrating still from its force: Mrs. Montague had kissed him! Was it a maternal salute from Harold's mother? Never! Peter had never seen Mrs. Montague kiss her own son, and besides, there was nothing maternal about her. No: she had done it because it had pleased her to kiss him, because she wanted to—because——

"I adore you!" Peter heard himself cry out.

Then he felt his lips rain feverish kisses on a cool, immobile hand, and when he raised his head and looked straight into Mrs. Montague's gleaming, mocking eyes, it seemed as if he must have grown ten years older in the last five minutes.

He walked home elated by a sense new to him, a sense quite different from any pride he had felt before—the enticing aroma left in his spirit by flattery. The marvelous five minutes on the veranda of Mira Mare were sealed on his mind; the very kiss on his forehead he seemed to feel like a scar with a delicious pain. The days

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before the next sitting were full of impatient waiting and suspense.

Peter went sketching with the Woodfins, but, to his annoyance, he could give Jack Woodfin but a poor idea of his work.

"Your mind isn't in it," said Peter's old teacher, hoarsely.

"I dare say," replied Peter, as he watched Jack Woodfin daub on his bright reds and blues in dashing strokes.

"I guess his mind is on the portrait he's painting," said the younger artist, with an impertinent laugh. "Is she handsome?"

Peter pretended not to hear, and painted on automatically, though he knew that his harbor sketch looked like a patchwork quilt.

How could these rough Woodfins, good souls and excellent painters though they were, understand the complex, delicate and yet ponderous task of painting Mrs. Montague's portrait?

The task grew more and more ponderous as it drew nearer to completion. Any harmless "Isn't the nose just a little too long?" or "Isn't the mouth a little too red?" from Harold's Aunt Hettie drove him to the brink of despair. The model there before him glittering, brightly alive, veiled only by the blurring atmospheric gauze of the hot June day, and the hard, lusterless study in green and blue on his canvas—how far apart they were!

"I've never been taken so seriously before," said Mrs. Montague. "You make me feel like a page in history."

"I want to immortalize you," said Peter. "That's what I'm trying so hard to do."

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"Let me go down to posterity amiably," said the model. "Don't paint all my sins."

Alas, Peter knew too well that he had neither guessed her sins nor solved the riddle in her eyes any more than on the first day of his portrait painting. It was not for him to read the meaning of this scroll, but to copy it faithfully in letters of green and blue.

At last came the day at Mira Mare when Peter laid down his palette and brush, stepped back briskly and let his arms dangle at his sides in a luxury of sudden idleness.

"Done!" he announced. "I'm not going to touch it any more."

Mrs. Montague rose with a sigh of relief. Then she swept over to his side and studied her own image silently for a long, long time, to Peter a time of torture.

"You've done well," she said, at last, laying her hand lightly on his arm. "It has turned out much better than I ever expected. I am satisfied, and I trust you are, too."

"It isn't so bad, after all," said Peter. "But I can't say I'm satisfied. I wish . . ."

He hesitated, and Mrs. Montague said with the gleam of triumph in her eyes that he had seen once before:

"What is it?"

"How dull life will be without you!" Peter cried. "How shall I stand it?"

Mrs. Montague smiled languidly.

"My house is yours and all that it contains," as the Spaniards say," she replied. "If I am no longer a model—can't I be a friend?"

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"Oh!" cried Peter, in happy confusion. "Will you—may I. . . . My best friend!"

They shook hands lingeringly.

"Thank you! Thank you!" Peter stammered vaguely, as he tore himself away.

On his way home from Green Shore—for the last time laden with easel and paint-box—Mrs. Montague's last words and his answer reverberated in his mind. "My best friend!" How fervently these words had escaped him. But now, as he was slowly walking along the causeway, it became quite clear to him that Mrs. Montague was no friend at all, but something quite different—something unstable, absorbing that made her image lurk in the background of his mind when he was away from her, and made him strangely alert and expectant when he was in her sight.

When Peter's mother from her doorstep called down: "Is it done?" he could only reply with a half-hearted "Yes."

"And is she satisfied?" his mother went on, eagerly.

"Yes, she was quite satisfied," said Peter, languidly.

"Then why aren't you enthusiastic?" asked his mother.

"I am very enthusiastic," Peter replied coolly, reluctant to talk about Mrs. Montague to his mother.

The next day Mrs. Montague invited Peter and his parents to dine with her and celebrate the completing of the portrait which stood, yet unframed, on an ornamental easel in the parlor. Never had this brilliant model been so dazzling and spirited before, and above all, her wit and gaiety were addressed more to Peter than to his father and mother.

"When my friends from town come to visit me," said

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Mrs. Montague, when they were bidding her good-by, "they will be anxious to meet you, after seeing the picture. Do you feel equal to any more old ladies, Mr. Loring?"

"I shall be glad of any excuse to come to Mira Mare," Peter exclaimed, though he felt a little as if he were playing a part before his parents while the memory of yesterday's intimate tête-à-tête was glowing in his mind.

To know that his visits were sought by so haughty and distinguished a lady enhanced Peter's days of familiar work and sport, and it seemed to him that life must have been dull indeed before Mrs. Montague turned from Harold's mother into the lady of the portrait in blue and green. It was not a little embarrassing for Peter when he received his cheque, for although he was very proud to show his father that he had earned a good sum by his labor, he felt as if some of the glamor of his new bond with the lady of Mira Mare had been rubbed off by such a sordid transaction. Yet, when he called on Mrs. Montague, the charm of their intercourse was untroubled.

Untroubled it was, to be sure, but not calm. Though the exquisiteness of the moment when the "kiss of the Muse" had burned on his forehead was never again approached, there was always during Peter's calls at Mira Mare something heavy in the air, like moisture before a thunderstorm, or, rather, as there was no danger of a storm, like the heavy scent of a fading rose. Then, on his homeward walks across the causeway, he would look out over the sea and wonder what the winter would bring and if it would take him far away from Mira Mare.

But one mellow August day, during one of his calls, Mrs. Montague said to him:

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"I have something to tell you which might interest you."

Peter looked up at her in suspense.

"Mrs. Gay—you know, Mrs. Odiorne's cousin—and Mrs. Doran, that little bird-like woman who was here last Sunday," Mrs. Montague went on, "both were so enamored of my portrait that they want you to paint them, too."

Peter did not try to conceal his pleasure.

"Do they want them done now—soon?" he asked eagerly.

"No," she replied, "they want their solid winter backgrounds. Mrs. Gay has a favorite chair, and Mrs. Doran a becoming portière that will have to be in the portraits. . . . I told them I wasn't at all sure if you wouldn't be in Paris or Munich or in New York this autumn."

Here was the sign for which he had been waiting: two orders for the winter in Boston, so near his home! He knew well and hardly needed Mrs. Montague's assurance that one order would naturally lead to another.

"And then I may see you in the winter?" Peter asked enthusiastically.

Mrs. Montague turned on Peter a penetrating glance of her clear, green eyes, and smiled in her sphinx-like way.

"I couldn't endure a winter without these calls," Peter went on, encouraged by her eloquent silence. "Everything else seems so dull . . ."

It seemed to him that now, under the eyes of his goddess, his work would be truly inspired.

"Every picture I shall paint shall be painted for you!" Peter declared.

"Oh, but not Mrs. Odiorne's, please," laughed Mrs. Montague.

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"Of course, I would rather paint you in a new pose every week," said Peter. "But, anyway, I am very happy!"

Not till he had left Mira Mare did it occur to Peter how pleased his father and mother would be by his new opportunity.

Peter was right: his mother fell on his neck and cried for joy, because her boy could stay so near home.

"Then you'll come to see us every month, at least," she cried. "And—and it'll be such a relief to know that you'll be with such nice people all the time. I was really a little worried in Paris."

Peter laughed gaily at his mother, but when he told the news to his father, he saw the same look of relief on his face.

"I am glad this path is opened to you, Peter," he said, in his subdued voice. "I was really anxious, wondering what would become of you this winter. And it is pleasant to know that you will be in such good company."

So there was satisfaction all round, and Peter felt like a man complete. As the cloud of anxiety for his immediate future was lifted from his spirit, he was in a mood for festivities, and as he was invited to parties more than in previous summers, he began to flirt with the girls of Gullport, so that Dick said to him one night as they walked home from a dance together:

"You're getting to be quite a lady-killer, Peter. You must be practicing for next winter."

But at heart Peter found these flirtations insipid and tiresome compared with the priceless hours at Mira Mare, and it was the prospect of being a frequent guest at Mrs.

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Montague's house in Boston which cast a golden glitter over his view of the winter.

August was drawing to an end, and Jack Woodfin, who had been Peter's sketching companion many a sunny morning, was going to leave for Munich. As they were sketching together for the last time, by the outskirts of the woods one afternoon, Peter remembered with a sudden pang of regret that visit on a rainy June day at the hermitage, when Jack Woodfin's work had thrilled him by its boldness and he had rejoiced to find an inspiring colleague. Colleague, to be sure, Jack Woodfin had been to him during the summer, but it was from elsewhere that Peter had drawn his inspiration.

"So you're not coming to Munich, after all," said Jack Woodfin, folding his easel for the last time in his old home this summer.

Peter shook his head.

"Nor even to New York!"

Peter shook his head again.

"I will give you one parting piece of advice," said the brusque artist, as he strapped his easel and paint-box together. "Don't dangle too long at a woman's apron-strings!"

"I'm not going to stay at home with my mother," Peter cried out, while he felt the blood rush into his face. "I'm going to work in Boston."

"They needn't be your mother's," Jack Woodfin replied dryly. "There are other women's apron-strings."

Peter knew too well that Jack Woodfin was aiming this dart at Mrs. Montague, and he swallowed this parting advice like bitter medicine, doubly bitter because his old teacher stood by and laughed. At the door of the hermit-

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age Peter shook hands with Jack and wished him good luck, but there was a chill in his voice.

With a numb sense of having missed an opportunity and of standing not too high in the esteem of a colleague, Peter walked sulkily home, left his sketch and tools in his room, and then, by way of distraction, strolled over to the causeway and across to Green Shore and Mira Mare.

CHAPTER VII

THE SONG WITH STRANGE WORDS

THE rough winter was howling and beating against the window-panes of Peter's Boston studio. He lit a candle because he wanted to lounge and smoke a few minutes in the restful light before he should plunge again into the cold, dark street, and then into the heat and glare of Mrs. Montague's reception room. The candle light gave the easel in the corner of the room a ghostly contour and cast a blurred cobweb glimmer over the sketches on the wall. One evening alone in his studio with a good book and his thoughts unscattered would be restful indeed, and more wisely spent, no doubt, than night after night in the drawing-room of his patronesses, or in their boxes at the theater, or the opera. How different his life had been in Boston three years ago as a faithful, plodding art student, before his year in Paris! Then his evenings, even though he had boasted no genial studio at that time, but only a dreary boarding-house room, had been spent in drawing compositions, studying anatomy and perspective, or reading about great artists of the past, and only occasional escapades in town with art-school companions. Peter drew in a long breath of smoke. Polite conversation by day to the ladies who sat for their portraits, and by night polite conversation again,

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or gay jokes and funny stories—what a change since those terse, unfrilled student days! Should he stay at home to-night for once? It would be only a colorless wholesale affair this evening, and he would not be missed. He drew the engraved invitation from his pocket and scanned it once more, holding it close to the candle. In her own strong hand Mrs. Montague had written underneath the formal words:

Be sure to come! I have a surprise for you.

How could he forget this postscript—how could he think of staying away and suppose that he would not be missed? He had not forgotten the night before last when he had said good-by to Mrs. Montague after escorting her to a concert, how a sudden light in her usually so cold green eyes had darted through him with irresistible force.

"I rarely see you alone," she had said, in exquisite reproachfulness, and Peter had bent over her hand and kissed it with ardor. The rapture of that moment was vibrating through him again. He would obey her summons—and it was high time, too!

Peter took his coat and hat hurriedly out of his small adjoining bedroom, snuffed out the candle, and ran along the silent, dark corridor and down the steep old stairs of the studio building out into the cold night air. As he was walking against the cold wind down Beacon Street, he wondered what the surprise could be. Perhaps it was a new order—that would fit into his plans very well, as he had finished Mrs. Carter's portrait this morning, and Miss Angel—that droll little old lady with the bobbing curls—would not be back from the South for two or three weeks, so that there was ample time to start another portrait.

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But after all, Mrs. Montague would not choose a big evening festivity as the best occasion to tell him such professional news, and Peter remained mystified.

The familiar row of carriages and motor cars, the familiar glare after the darkness of the street, the familiar animated buzz after the hush of the night outside! There they were, surging against him on the stairs, the tide of ladies, jeweled, powdered and amiably smiling, who would or might pose for him some day! But in the midst of this flood Peter caught sight of Harold who stood in a corner, handsome and suave, with the bored negligent air that he always affected, and let himself be entertained by one of the few younger women, a laughing, chattering little blonde. With a quick fleeting pang Peter realized once more that although Mrs. Montague showered her invitations upon him, he was never asked to any of the youthful dances and dinner parties given for Harold; he was never given a chance as an old friend of Harold's to mingle with the law-school men and the young damsels who suited his age. Moreover, he was estranged from Harold since the summer when he had painted the portrait of Harold's mother, though the chill that had crept between them was never made manifest in word or look. To Peter, Harold seemed an ungrateful son who did not know how to prize his dazzling mother, in whose favor Peter was content to sun himself, and to Harold Peter was no doubt "one of those artist fellows" who pleased his mother's capricious fancy!

Peter made his way into the big reception room with the crimson wallpaper, where the Corots and Daubignys hung, and took his place in the line that moved slowly toward Mrs. Montague. Queenly as always, she stood

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under the opalescent lampshade, with her bouquet of curious green orchids, bending her proud, swanlike neck of which he knew every line by heart, smiling her cool, brilliant smile.

Whenever Mrs. Montague welcomed Peter in a large assembly, though her words were never so cool and formal, there was always a gleam in her eye—cold, passionless eyes, too!—that seemed to say: “It is really only you that I want to see; all the others are just so many insects buzzing around us.” And so it seemed again tonight.

“What is my surprise?” Peter asked in a low voice, when it was his turn to shake hands at last.

“One that you will like altogether too well,” she said with a gleam in her eyes and an odd twitch of her lips.

“You are always a surprise when I see you again!” said Peter.

Then a stout gentleman came up and gently pushed him aside. Peter was startled himself at the glib way in which compliments dropped from his lips ever since the painting of Mrs. Montague’s portrait—from the lips of the rustic boy who had always scoffed at flattery. Was he turning into a young man’s version of Miss Fanny Runkle?

He strolled on through the swarming rooms as best he could, past the women with their unnaturally shining eyes and garrulous lips, into a remote corner where he could lean against a door-post and enjoy a view of Mrs. Montague in the frame of a doorway with dark portières drawn aside. He was not in a mood for light and silly talk, but he was always glad to rest his artist’s eye on beauty. Would his hostess spare him a little gay dis-

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course tonight while she fanned herself, tired from too many forced smiles? What could be the surprise for him that he would like too well?

"Why, Mr. Loring, not talking to anybody! What is the matter?" It was Mrs. Perkins who swept up to him with a sugary smile on the full moon face that he knew well, as it had been his daily work for two weeks to glorify it on canvas.

"I was just looking," replied Peter. "A painter always has an excuse for using his eyes more than his tongue—don't you think so?"

"Especially when there is such a delightful view," gushed Mrs. Perkins, and swept on like a little whitecap wave that breaks and is lost in a restless sea.

There was Mrs. Carter sailing toward him, radiant with the diamond crescent in her reddish hair . . . No, he did not want Mrs. Carter's glibness now; he was tired and content to watch Mrs. Montague bow and smile from some obscure corner, like a page watching his queen from afar.

To escape Mrs. Carter, he turned into the little rococo room, a quiet retreat where the few voices sounded muffled after the din of the larger rooms. A few men were talking together in one corner round the punch bowl, a flirtation seemed to be going on in the other. It was Harold, too, who was laughing in his gay, careless way, with a dark-haired lady in a gauzy dress of deep rose, whose back was turned toward Peter.

The lady was talking with lively gestures and an expressive way of tossing back her head, so that Peter found himself wondering what she might be saying to Harold. The lady turned round . . .

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"Virginia!" Peter had her hand in both of his instantly.

"I don't know if you like your surprise!" she said, laughing merrily. "It was your mother's idea—so you can blame her!"

So it had been his own mother's idea to surprise him with Virginia's coming, and not Mrs. Montague's at all!

Harold, as a cordial host, shook hands with Peter in a friendly way.

"Isn't it good to see Virginia again?" he said, once more the old comrade, but turned immediately to greet a newcomer and soon slipped out of the room.

Peter sat down in Harold's place on the sofa beside Virginia.

"I can't believe that you're real!" he assured her. "How long is it since I've seen you last?"

"Oh—two years ago—last summer," she answered in her melodious voice. "But then only such a little while. It is really very long ago that I stayed at home all the year round—I was sixteen years old then, and you were away at Art School in the winter. Oh, we are strangers, Peter."

Although Virginia was by far the most striking lady in the room—in fact, the whole room, with its flushed and restless inmates seemed but a natural background for her beauty—yet it seemed to Peter that they ought to be talking at home by an intimate fireside, perhaps in Miss Clarissa's quaint old sitting-room with its scent of lavender.

"You haven't changed much since that time in Miss Clarissa's garden," he said warmly, "and not a bit since I saw you last. But you're going to stay at home forever,

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aren't you? And are you staying with Mrs. Montague now?—I hope for a long, long time."

"Oh, for a fortnight or so," she answered. "You see, we didn't come back till after Christmas, and Mrs. Montague told Mamma I ought to have a taste of real life before the season was over. She thinks I've been burying my youth in the watering-places abroad, and she says our good Gullport has no real life at all. I was glad to come home, though, I assure you, and I hope we'll stay for a year at least. Mamma is pretty well now. I'm tired of being uprooted, you know."

"So am I," said Peter. "I mean, I'm tired of your being uprooted. And you never came to Paris, after all!"

"No," said Virginia, wistfully. "I should like to have gone. We could have had fun in Paris, I think—but no, perhaps not, after all. You were probably leading a gay artist's life, and a visitation from two New England prigs would have been too dull."

Peter laughed.

"I am ten times gayer here than I ever was in Paris," he declared. "I slaved in Paris."

"And now you're an independent artist," she exclaimed, pretending to be impressed. "How grand!"

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"And have you kept up your singing?" he asked. "How I should love to hear you again!"

Virginia nodded.

"Yes," she said confidentially, "I've been working quite hard. I found a good teacher in Nice—an Italian—and he told me"—she looked up at Peter with glowing dark eyes—"he told me I was his most promising pupil."

"You must sing tonight!" cried Peter.

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Virginia made a forbidding gesture.

"Oh, I should die of fright with all these people around," she protested. "You see, I haven't had much training—a few lessons here—a few lessons there—that doesn't amount to much . . . But some day, if you'll come to see me here alone, then I'll sing to you!"

"Tomorrow!" cried Peter.

"Then you must take me to your studio and show me your paintings!" laughed Virginia.

Again Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm sorry," said Peter honestly, "I have almost nothing to show in my studio. My pictures are all at the houses of various elderly ladies—and besides, they aren't much to look at."

"I like the one of Mrs. Montague," said Virginia, "it's a brilliant study in blue and green."

"Well, I think that is the best—even though it's the first one," Peter had to admit.

"You know—" said Virginia quickly, and then hesitated.

"Oh, what?" asked Peter eagerly.

"You said a little while ago," she began again, "that I had not changed a bit. Now, I can't say the same of you. You seem so—so different!"

"How different?" asked Peter, perceiving that the difference was not in his favor.

"Oh," said Virginia reluctantly, "you seem so grown-up—so mundane—so like anybody . . . Forgive me!" she cried, suddenly, while her pale face turned crimson, "perhaps I ought not to have said that!"

But Peter laughed gaily.

"Why not?" he asked. "I don't mind that at all—an

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artist nowadays, fortunately, no longer has to be different from other people—he isn't expected to be a quaint, queer fellow."

"Oh!" sighed Virginia, shaking her head. "It isn't the artist—the true artist—who ever seems queer to me; he seems the only sane and sensible being to me, and it's the other people who are queer and a little wrong."

Peter gazed at the wistful play about her lips and the inspired luster in her eyes, and he was silent.

All at once Virginia broke out into gay laughter, and Peter recovered from his astonishment only as he remembered her old way of leaping from seriousness to mirth.

"I have been much too serious," she said. "I know it isn't at all *comme il faut* to be serious at parties. Come, let's be correct now and jabber all the silly nonsense we can think of."

She rose airily and led him through the crowded rooms, laughing merrily and making mischievous remarks about the people they saw round them. Peter did not stir from her side all the evening, for, as Virginia was a stranger in Boston, and Harold kept away discreetly, he could be her cavalier undisturbed. And he was proud to be seen as her cavalier, for he knew that she was the loveliest and the youngest lady in the house.

In his joy Peter forgot that he had not said a word to Mrs. Montague since his first greeting. He and Virginia stood eating ices by the great fireplace, watching the blaze and talking cheerfully about Dick and Elsie Robins at home, when Peter felt the light touch of a fan on his arm and, turning round, saw his hostess herself standing beside him, dazzling and majestic in her velvet gown and her brilliants.

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"How did you like my surprise?" she asked.

"The best surprise I could dream of!" answered Peter.

Then he blushed suddenly, as he remembered his fervent hand-kiss of only two nights ago.

Mrs. Montague's green eyes, however, remained cool, and she did not seem to notice his embarrassment.

"Mr. Giroux is going to play the flute now, with Miss Estell at the harp," said Mrs. Montague, "and when they have finished, Virginia, I do hope you will change your mind."

"Are you going to sing?" Peter fairly shouted at Virginia. "Is she going to—" But when he turned round to address Mrs. Montague, she had vanished.

"Please, please sing!" begged Peter, but Virginia soberly shook her head.

The greater part of the guests now passed into the big music room to take seats, and the din of artificially excited voices subsided into a murmur. Peter and Virginia settled themselves on a sofa in a corner, and while the quaint, melancholy strains of the flute and the delicate ripples of the harp quivered toward them, it seemed to Peter that the music was reflected as in a mirror in Virginia's dark eyes.

"You are not enjoying this as much as I am," said Virginia, after the first movement.

"Yes, I am," said Peter. "I am enjoying your joy!"

Then the plaintive flute set in again with a pastoral air that seemed to challenge the listeners in the room to throw off their tinsel and gambol in the fields.

When the duet was finished and the guests were still eagerly applauding, Mrs. Montague glided secretly up to Virginia and whispered:

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"How are you feeling about it now?"

"Oh, I can't, after this!" declared Virginia. "How could I?"

"Oh, yes, you'll sing all the better," pleaded Peter.

Virginia hesitated a minute.

"Perhaps, when they've begun to go home," she said at last, "when only a few are left."

"Hurrah!" cried Peter, "I'll chase them away."

Then he looked, somewhat alarmed, up at his hostess whose august presence he had forgotten for the moment, but Mrs. Montague smiled down at him with irony on her lips.

"That's a noble resolution," she said to Virginia. "I'm glad. I'll speak to Mr. Dagger, and you can sing the songs you practiced with him last night."

"Oh, Peter!" cried Virginia, when Mrs. Montague had left them, "these people are very blasé, aren't they? They're not a friendly audience, I'm afraid!"

They stayed in their retreat quietly, Virginia rather tremulous, and Peter fanning her eagerly, as if he were trying to fan away her stage fright, while the company was gradually thinning out. Then came Mr. Dagger, a short, jovial, middle-aged man, with an armful of music books, and he and Virginia after much discussion decided what songs should be sung.

A diminished company now came pouring back into the music room that had been deserted, and a murmur was swept along, till the words reached Peter: "Miss Grey is going to sing!"

"You'll have to, now, you know," whispered Peter delightedly.

Virginia rose, pale, with trembling arms, and Mr. Dag-

ger followed her to the grand piano at the opposite end of the room, like a grotesque poodle.

"Who's Miss Grey?" Peter heard some one ask behind him, as he was looking for a seat nearer the piano.

"A niece of Mrs. Montague's," a voice replied, "who was brought up in France."

"No," said another voice, "I think she is just a summer acquaintance from Green Shore."

Peter found a seat at the side from which he could observe Virginia well without being seen by her.

As she leaned over the piano to give Mr. Dagger directions, she seemed to have thrown off her tremulous stage fright and emerged laughing and at ease.

Now the room was hushed. Then rose a silver, bell-like, fairy voice—Virginia's voice? It was hard to believe that he had been laughing, bantering this very night with the creature that had held locked up such a voice as this, now set free.

Songs of Schumann that Peter had heard before—"The Lotus Flower," "The First Violet"—and then delicate gauzy French songs—"Debussy," someone whispered—and then a song in Italian that Peter could not understand, a sunny, jubilant lay that echoed in Peter's heart. The strangeness of the words enhanced the beauty of the tones; the rhythm, the melody seemed to lift him and bear him away. . . .

A scent of garden flowers enveloped him—summer, sunlight, earliest youth. Virginia was holding gilly-flowers in her hand in Miss Clarissa's garden . . . And now a burst of radiance: red poppies, fiery, glorious and a flood of sunlight on a child's golden hair. Red poppies—red poppies! Oh, the song must never end, or the vision

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would fade! He wanted to catch the vision with his hands like a fleeting butterfly—he wanted to hold back the song that was flowing, flowing on . . .

The song was ended; then brutal applause chased the vision quite away. But Peter was like one stunned. Where had that vision been slumbering these last months, like the enchanted Princess asleep till wakened by the Prince's healing kiss? How could the vision but fade here among pale, jaded people who had all heard the song, but no doubt seen nothing!

"Oh, if you knew what your singing made me see!" he exclaimed to Virginia, seizing her hand. She looked at him in open-eyed astonishment, but before she could speak, Harold had come up behind them.

"That was stunning!" he cried, and Peter turned away.

He was moving in a trance, and though the vision had faded with the song, like one who has stepped out of a surf bath aglow from the tingle of the salt and the shock of the waves, he was still throbbing from its force. He looked for his hostess and bade her an indifferent good-by, forgetting even to thank her for the surprise that she had helped to plan, and then went back to Virginia, who was still talking with Harold.

"Good-by. Thank you!" he said inanely, shook hands with Virginia, then with Harold, and hurried away out of the swarming, buzzing house.

The vision—how pale it had grown in these last months, so pale, indeed, that his inward eye had lost sight of it altogether! But, after all, how could the red poppies keep their summer glow in this hothouse of bland discourse and art that pleased and flattered? Back in his studio, Peter lit the single candle again and sat upright on his divan to

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brood into the night. Had he lost his youth in these two winters? Virginia had come to call him back. Had he been living under a spell since the days of rapturous portrait painting at Mira Mare—a spell cast by Harold's mother, the abhorrence of his childhood? But where was the rapture in painting Mrs. Perkins and Mrs. Carter and Mrs. Jeremiah Jones? He remembered how he had overheard Mrs. Perkins say to her neighbor at a concert when he sat behind her: "I've had such a busy day—first I had a shampoo, then I sat for my portrait, then I had to rush to luncheon, and then to a bridge party!"

Virginia had called him "different": different indeed! Peter lit a cigarette and smoked, for he knew that he could not sleep. The spectral candle glow lit up a sketch on the wall—a summer sketch that he had made with the Woodfins, of the beach in the early morning. The sea, the rocks, the woods were fit models for a young man's brush, Nature the only woman whose face was forever young and never jaded. Landscape painting, Peter knew too well, was his real vocation, and he did not have a single landscape in his studio beyond the rough sketches from the summer. The Art Club would have a landscape exhibition in February—the first of next month would be the last day for sending in a picture—and Peter had no picture to send. Now fortunately, Miss Angel's portrait would not begin for a week or more. Why not make a painting from the various sketches on the wall—a picture of the rocks and surf in a storm? Yes; he would do that, he would tell the little Italian model that he need not pose for him at all, he would forget portrait painting for a week and bring the breath of the sea and the murmur of the surf into his dusty studio.

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With this resolution made, Peter went to sleep and did not wake up till late in the morning. The sun shone cheerfully in at the big studio window and Peter was in a working mood. He would toil hard till dark and then call on Virginia at five, as a reward. This should be the best landscape he had ever painted, the work of many summers blended into a final chord; he would startle the Art Club and win a name among his colleagues—not only in the world of artistic fashion!

At the end of a tense day's work, he went to call on Virginia, eager to tell her about it; but she was gone out. Thus checked in his impulse to confide, Peter decided not to let Virginia know about his new work at all, but to surprise her by announcing when the time came that he had a landscape accepted by the Art Club.

The next day Peter found a note from Mrs. Montague, asking him to dinner Thursday night "in the family," so that she might see him at leisure. Until Thursday night Peter worked hard: the beach and the rocks grew under his hands and the surf was rising . . . How he would have liked to tell Virginia about his secret and absorbing task!

As he stepped into the crimson reception room with the Corots and Daubignys, he saw Mrs. Montague alone, standing in front of the window-seat against the crimson curtain, reading a letter. There was never a more queenly apparition than this woman in her black gown against the crimson curtain, never a more enigmatic, bitter smile than that which played about her spare, haughty lips, as she read her letter. If he could paint her now in this moment, this one rare moment of her perfect outer repose and inner unrest! What was youth, what were

rocks and waves beside this complexity, this mysterious bitterness revealed for a moment against a crimson curtain! Had he rebelled against the spell cast by such majesty? The more fool he!

"Oh, Mr. Loring!" Mrs. Montague folded up her letter quickly, and a mundane smile transformed her face. "Virginia is just showing Mr. Atherton your portrait."

"Mr. Atherton is here!" cried Peter. "You have surprises in store for me. I haven't seen him for a year!"

"He is a difficult guest to capture during the college year," said Mrs. Montague. "It takes a new picture or a rare first edition to entice him here."

Then Virginia came into the room with sprightly steps.

"Mr. Atherton likes your picture," she cried, laughing with radiant eyes.

"I do," said Maurice Atherton who followed Virginia and shook hands with Peter. "Paris has done something for you! And I hear that you are leading a happy life here, a constant 'dream of fair women.'"

"No," said Peter, looking at Mrs. Montague, "only one so far."

Then he felt Virginia's astonished glance almost burning into his face, and he remembered that Virginia did not know him as a courtier.

"Shall we wait for Harold?" asked Mrs. Montague, and in that moment Harold strolled into the room with fluent apologies. Atherton smiled on Harold and all his masterful blasé airs, as if he were still a boy of ten.

"And how do you like the law?" he asked.

"Harold is more interested in breaking the law than in studying it," said Mrs. Montague, "by speeding, by dancing later than the city allows——"

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"I think mother wants the reputation of a wicked son," said Harold. "She always makes me out worse than I am."

There was an undertone of rebellion whenever Harold bantered with his mother that did not escape Peter. And during the intimate dinner Harold was rather silent, partly, no doubt, because his mother and Atherton talked about her collection of engravings, a topic for which he had no patience, while Virginia fixed eyes of awe on the gay philosopher.

"He's the most wonderful man I know," she whispered to Peter at her side. "He seems to be smiling at everything so calmly, although he doesn't make fun of anything the way everyday people do. Yet—" she added, "I am just the least bit afraid of him."

"My mother is, too," whispered Peter. "She says he makes one feel silly. Perhaps it is because he can see through the hidden motives people have for saying what they say and for doing——"

Peter stopped short, for Maurice Atherton was turning round.

"Mrs. Montague tells me," he said with his faint, ironic smile, "that you have more orders than you can fill."

"Why, Mr. Loring has jumped into popularity," said Mrs. Montague. "He simply woke up one day and found himself popular."

Peter flushed with pleasure. He thought it very graceful of his hostess not to indicate that it was she who not only had discovered him, but had made him known and brought him his reputation; he was thrilled by her pride in him; in this moment he thought her more beauti-

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ful and queenly than ever, and he felt like making a vow of everlasting homage.

"And do you find your colleagues worth while?" asked Maurice Atherton.

"I know very few," Peter began reluctantly.

"You see, Mr. Atherton," his hostess continued for him, "there are few painters here who are Mr. Loring's style. Most of them have no general culture, and many of them are scarcely fit to be seen in a drawing-room—like that clumsy boor in Gullport—that sullen painter of marshes who lives in the woods and grunts in monosyllables when a lady speaks to him—Mr. Woodcock, or something of that sort."

Peter knew that he ought to defend his old teacher, but in that moment he did not have the heart to contradict a word uttered by the hostess whom he adored.

In the instant hush that followed, Peter turned toward Virginia, prompted, no doubt, by his sudden sense of guilt, and then he met Virginia's glance—a glance so shocked, so wounded, so reproachful, that he turned away again, with remorse biting at his heart.

"When I was in Florence," Atherton began, and soon engaged Mrs. Montague in a tête-à-tête discourse, so that Peter was left alone with his bad conscience. For Virginia had turned immediately to Harold, and was talking with him eagerly in a voice so low that Peter could not understand her words; her eyes were sparkling for Harold's benefit, she was laughing gaily, she had plunged into a brisk flirtation. This was to punish him—she had found him altogether too "different" from the Peter of her childhood!

With a dull sense of pain, Peter joined in the conversa-

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tion of Atherton and Mrs. Montague, though he cast distracted glances at Virginia, until they all rose and sauntered into the little rococo room where he had seen Virginia first the other night. She now sat with Harold on the yellow brocade sofa at the end of the room farthest from Peter, sipping her coffee leisurely and laughing up at Harold as if she were quite happy at his side.

After coffee, Mrs. Montague took out her collection of first prints and showed it to Peter and Atherton who was a connoisseur. If there had been no Virginia flirting with Harold at the end of the room, Peter would have been more than content to look at rare engravings in exquisite intimacy with Maurice Atherton and Mrs. Montague, who opened her portfolio only for chosen spirits. But, as it was, he felt an outcast from the realm where he belonged. There was youth, laughing and bantering on the yellow brocade sofa, while he was keeping sober step with his mother's generation! Had he really been moving under the benumbing spell of Mrs. Montague that had thus perverted his senses? Why could he not break loose from the necromancy that was bleaching the glow of his youth?

"What do you think, Mr. Loring?"—Oh, Mrs. Montague was asking his opinion about something, no doubt about the print in front of his eyes which were not looking. He must look now, and answer, and be polite and go on playing the courtier.

Meanwhile he was thinking in the background of his mind that Harold was a dangerous rival, that Mrs. Perkins had gossiped about a violent flirtation between Harold and an English girl last summer, to whom she had supposed that he was secretly engaged, but that this rumor

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was by no means authentic. Peter could not think of marrying: though many a poor artist envied him for his prosperity, he would not yet dare to shelter a flower like Virginia. But, at the same time, he could not bear the thought that Harold might easily snatch her from his reach.

"You are silent, Mr. Loring," said Mrs. Montague.

"I'm only admiring," Peter replied, and was glad when the portfolio with the prints was closed.

Deliberately he crossed the room to Virginia and said:

"Won't you please sing, Virginia—that song—that Italian song—do!"

But Virginia looked up at him wistfully and shook her head.

"No, I have sung for you once," she said, with a sad smile, "and that was enough."

Rebellion broke out in Peter's heart. He shrugged his shoulders, turned his back on Virginia and joined his hostess again.

Mr. Atherton was bending over a large book of illustrations on a table, and Mrs. Montague was looking out of the window, for a moment listless and forgetful of her guests. The gardenia at her waist had slipped from her sash and was gliding to the floor. Peter stooped to pick it up. A momentary beam of light kindled in Mrs. Montague's cold, green eyes as she turned her glance quickly away from the window to Peter, and when he gave her back the flower, her cool hand rested on his, as if a swift bird had passed in its flight and laid its wings lightly on his hand.

CHAPTER VIII

ASHES

A KNOCK at the studio door! Peter left his easel where stood the portrait of young Miss Reynolds, to which he was adding the last touches, and sauntered to the door.

"Mr. Atherton!" cried Peter. "So you have really come!"

"I said I would swoop down on you unannounced, when you would least expect me," said Maurice Atherton. "Now, let me see . . ."

Peter felt as if his dull studio were suddenly illumined by the newcomer's pervading and unfailing cheerfulness, a placid cheerfulness that seemed never to be caused by any special joy. It happened that Peter had three portraits in his studio to finish, and one on which he was to cover the left ear with more hair.

"Only portraits," he said to his visitor. "I wish I had something to show—something with an idea in it——"

"Oh, I dare say your models have few ideas in their heads," said Atherton. "But that doesn't hinder you from having ideas about them."

Maurice Atherton stood in silent contemplation of bland Miss Reynolds with her meek glance, Mrs. Platt with her square face and the diamond earrings more brilliant than

her eyes, Miss Angell with the bobbing curls, and Mrs. Carter, whose big left ear was to be curtained by more red-brown hair.

There was not a sign on Maurice Atherton's calm face that Peter could read, and he was growing nervous with suspense.

"They are nice," said the philosopher at last, with a lingering emphasis on the last word, as he turned his large luminous eyes on Peter. "But there is a lack, a lack of something that you promised to have when I saw your sketches last."

Peter felt a pang.

"I know," he said, humbly. "But that was when I was studying. You see, now I get no criticism whatever, only . . ."

"Only praise," Atherton finished, with his placid, half-ironic smile.

"Yes," said Peter, and looked out of the window over the gray city to avoid his companion's intuitive glance.

"Too many women!" said Maurice Atherton with the dispassionate voice of an oracle.

"You are right," said Peter.

If Jack Woodfin, if any of his colleagues should have criticized him thus, Peter would have resisted, he would have remembered that he was the most fashionable young portrait painter in Boston: but what was that in Maurice Atherton's brilliant eyes?

"I always give one piece of advice to young artists," the philosopher continued, seating himself leisurely on the divan by the window. "I say to them: don't marry! Keep your eyes clear from the gray mist that rises through cares and petty considerations——"

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"But I'm not married!" protested Peter.

"Your case is worse," Atherton replied. "You must be kind to Mrs. X because her husband has just made a gift to the Studio Club; you must not paint Mrs. Y's nose too red, because she has just invited you to her musical night; you must not make Miss Z too stout, because she has a weakness for a French painter whom she met on the steamer——"

"You are right!" laughed Peter, in spite of his humiliating grief. "Far too right. But what would you have me do? I can't run away now—just when I'm in demand—I can't wilfully turn out of my one path to success——" Peter felt that his tone was growing theatrical, so he shrugged his shoulders and said tersely: "What shall I do?"

"Oh, keep your fashionable orders, by all means," Atherton replied, "only in filling them—paint away, as if your models were only chance objects for your spirit to reflect with its own light, as if your models were your slaves——"

"Oh, dear," sighed Peter, "I think I've been the slave of my models!"

"Above all," his visitor went on, "never paint to please, never paint to match the wallpaper in a drawing-room; never—Oh, whatever you do, never forget that the artist is above the world of affairs and fashions and has a right to smile down."

Peter sat penitent, like a schoolboy. He was longing to tell Atherton about the picture of the rocks in storm that he had been painting at the studio of his own free will; but he checked this impulse, because, after all, it would be better to wait a few days, until he

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could boast that the picture would hang at the Art Club exhibition.

"In the summer," was all that he said, "I'm going to do my landscapes again. That's where I really belong."

"Your portrait of Mrs. Montague seems to me more inspired than any of these," said Mr. Atherton, with a sweeping gesture at the four portraits in the studio. "Perhaps the sea in the background helped you there."

Peter did not dare to say that Mrs. Montague had been a more inspiring model than the other ladies.

"Mrs. Montague thought the picture of Mrs. Carter—the one with the red-brown hair—one of my best," Peter said lamely.

"Mrs. Montague," Atherton responded, "is an art lover, no doubt; but you must remember that the arts are for her only luxurious pastimes in her leisure: as she wants rare and well-toned rugs under her slipper, so she wants the finest music to beguile her evenings, and agreeable paintings to rest her jaded eyes when she lets them wander over her walls in passing through her rooms—especially a painting that flatters her more than her mirror!"

He dared to speak in such a tone of her! If anyone but Atherton had spoken thus, Peter's chivalry would have been roused; as the adoring page that he was, he would have championed his queen. But Maurice Atherton, who had been her coveted guest at Mira Mare when Peter had played on the beach, a little boy; Atherton, whose brilliant eyes could penetrate beneath fair skins—Atherton, no doubt, was right! In this moment Peter repented that he had neglected his old companions of the Art School and had not tried to know any of his good colleagues.

"It harms one's art to be a fashionable painter, I suppose," Peter tried to say flippantly, but his own words sounded flat.

Atherton had risen to go.

"Thank you for opening my eyes," said Peter, at the door.

"That's what a philosopher is for," said Maurice Atherton and added with his placid smile: "I hope you don't mind my free speech."

Alone in his studio, Peter looked at his four portraits with stern eyes: they all looked like sisters, Mrs. Platt and Miss Reynolds and Mrs. Carter and Miss Angell, though they were all different types and their ages varied from nineteen to sixty, but there was the same vapidness, the some uninspired smoothness about them all. Atherton was right. In Atherton's eyes Peter must redeem his art, and first of all by showing his "Rocks in Storm" at the Art Club.

With this final note of joy in hope ringing in his mind, Peter lived through a dull dinner party at Mrs. Carter's that very night, moving and conversing as in a trance, and in the same way through the remainder of the week, with its routine of day's work and night's amusement. The reply from the Art Club was long in coming, but all the more exhilarating was this game of anticipation.

At last the morning came when the letter from the Art Club was thrown in at his door. Welcome, welcome piece of mail! Peter tore open the envelope. . . . Rejected! This was a possibility he had not dreamed of, this was too much! He dropped onto the divan and sat with his hands clasped, brooding and staring at the cracked and unswept floor. He had been so sure that the painting of

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his native landscape was his true vocation, he had been so proud of this one free, unprescribed work of the winter, and now . . .

For a whole half hour Peter sat without stirring, with his mind a dreary void. Then his eye fell on another letter that he had not even picked up from the floor, a little square mauve envelope, such as he received often in these days. Languidly Peter tore it open and read a letter from Mrs. Gay, whose portrait had been one of his first orders in the autumn, asking him to paint her little girl Daisy with her poodle.

Peter tossed the little lavender note on the floor, then broke out into a long and bitter laugh: what irony that these two letters should have come in one mail! Well, if his colleagues repulsed him, if the work that was most truly his own was not wanted, he would go where he was sought and paint little girls named Daisy with poodles on their laps! Was he not himself turning into a lapdog, licking the hands of patronesses?

It happened fortunately that Peter had no appointment today, and so, loathing the sight of his studio, he went outdoors and tramped in the snow down Beacon Hill and along the frozen river against the wind that made the snowflakes dance and the trees sway their boughs. But when he came back to his studio, the bitterness was still in his heart. He dabbled at a still life—a foolish combination of a jug and a few lemons and a statuette—because he could not let a day go by without touching a paint-brush, and welcomed the early dusk as a summons to stop work. What should he do the long, dreary evening alone in the cold studio with his silent rage? He went out to get an evening paper and then studied Boston's

program of pleasure. He would go to the theater to distract himself—to some wild, absurd melodrama. "The Coming of William" seemed to fit his purpose; so, at eight o'clock, he found himself in the crowded theater in an orchestra seat pretty far back and at the side. He had barely arrived when the lights went out and the curtain rose on the old Kentucky home of William.

Though there were many spirited activities on the stage, even a pistol shot or two, yet Peter's thoughts were roaming far away, wondering who the favored among his colleagues might be whose works had been accepted by the Art Club, wondering if he should ever have a landscape exhibited, wondering what he would have done if he had never met Mrs. Montague. No doubt, he would not be sitting here . . .

Was not that she herself, Mrs. Montague, in the box across the house, inclining toward her neighbor with that infallible grace of hers? For the first act was over and the lights had been turned on. A lady whose face was hidden by a fan was talking with Mrs. Montague: could it be Virginia? The fan was whisked aside, Virginia looked straight across the house, her eye caught his, and instantly turned away. There was no bowing, perhaps because they were too far apart, perhaps—no, surely—because Virginia did not want Peter to know that she had seen him. Now she was playing with her fan and laughing gaily at the young man beside her, now she was tossing back her head and turning round to talk with Harold behind her, now her wine-colored scarf was slipping to the floor and her partner was stooping to pick it up, whereupon she smiled graciously.

There she was, laughing and flirting with Harold and

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her other cavalier, while Peter was looking on in his lonely seat at the side. Did she do it all to torture him, because she knew that he was watching, or was she in her element, regardless of him, with these others? Was this really the Virginia of Miss Clarissa's garden? If she could guess the disappointment, the weariness of heart that had sent him here, would she be laughing at Harold's jokes with such abandon?

During the next act, Peter's eyes kept turning to the box at the left, though he could not see its occupants, and he scarcely heeded the play as he waited in suspense for the curtain to fall and the performance that absorbed his attention to begin in the box. When the lights were turned on again, there was the same gaiety on Virginia's lips, the same frolicsome flutter of her fan, the same care-free toss of her head. Peter wondered why he was not going home, because the play did not hold his interest, and Virginia's sprightliness and Harold's suave, lazy smile annoyed him.

But all at once Mrs. Montague looked with her penetrating glance in his direction, raised her lorgnette, dropped it again and bowed to him with a brilliant smile. The smile vibrated through him like a current: what did the coquetries of a wayward damsel matter, when he received such a bow from a proud, august lady whom others approached with shyness! Let Virginia flirt with whom she liked—he had the favor of a queen! With this exultation, Peter stayed till the end, coolly watched Harold help Virginia into her red velvet coat and then walked to his dreary home.

After a night of wild dreams, Peter woke up for his daily toil. Miss Norma Angell, a little old lady, was com-

ing to his studio at half-past nine with her crocheting for "local color," as she had explained.

"And in the afternoon I had better go and play nursemaid," Peter said to himself, as he remembered the letter from Mrs. Gay.

Little Daisy Gay, for whose portrait Peter had to make plans with her mother, proved to be a spoilt child who had to be coaxed into each trial position, and the poodle was still more rebellious. As the child went to school, Peter was to paint her only on Saturday mornings, beginning the very next day.

What a Saturday morning! Although Daisy's nurse sat in the nursery where the portrait was being painted and told her stories, the child would whine every ten minutes:

"I'm tired; I want to go and play!"

Then she would jump down from her chair unbidden, and the poodle after her, and Peter and the nurse would have to use all their strategy to make the poodle pose again.

"Oh, how ugly you made me!" cried the child, when the canvas was barely covered with paint. "I don't look like that! You must make me pretty. And don't forget my curls—and Fip's curls, too!"

Peter wondered what his father would say if he could look in and see his son at work on Saturday mornings. Perhaps, if Peter had been in a sunny mood, he would have made friends with the child and thought of his own childhood and the days when Virginia had long, golden curls. But the sunshine had fled from his spirit and left only a pale, depressing haze. When this fog would lift, Peter could not tell, nor whether it would ever lift at all.

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A few days after the night at the theater, Peter was summoned to Mrs. Montague's.

When he found himself opposite his patroness, by the blazing open fire in the room with the crimson wallpaper, where she was bending over her teacups like some infallible empress dowager performing a significant rite, the old magic began to work again. It was easy enough to let 'Atherton chide you for submitting to the sway of such an empress when you were out of her sight, but when she was passing you your teacup and talking about Zuluologa and looking at you with green sea eyes, then it was that you lapsed into voluntary servitude. Peter was trying to guess, during the sprightly discourse, why he had been called today, but his eloquent hostess vouchsafed him no hint. Suddenly—Peter scarcely knew how they had led up to this point—Mrs. Montague was telling him that Virginia had consented to prolong her visit for several weeks, but that she had to be back at home for her parents' silver, wedding in March.

"And you know—now that I'm coming to the point!" said Mrs. Montague, "I have been trying hard to think of an original gift for Mrs. Grey, and nothing has occurred to me that could compare with a portrait of Virginia from your hands."

Peter knew that he was turning pale; he knew that he was longing to paint Virginia, now that the idea had been suggested, but he knew, too, that he was hostile to the thought.

"I shall be very glad to paint her," said his lips, inanely.

In that moment Virginia came airily into the room, wrapped in furs, with a rose fastened on the muff, and an out-of-door glow on her usually pallid cheek.

"Has he consented?" she asked Mrs. Montague with laughing eyes, when she had shaken hands with Peter briskly.

Mrs. Montague nodded.

"You know," said Virginia, still addressing her hostess, "I had an idea in the middle of the night."

She tossed off her fur scarf and sat down by the tea table.

"I've been thinking," she went on, "that mother would like to have my picture as a kind of remembrance of my visit to you, the first year that we came back to settle at home. That would give it a kind of symbolic value, you see——"

"I'm sure Mr. Loring doesn't mind painting a picture with a symbolic value," said Mrs. Montague, "or did you want an allegorical device painted in the background?"

"My coat of arms?" responded Virginia. "No, something much better—now, please don't protest. I've set my heart on it. I think it would be so appropriate, so symbolic, if you would be in the picture, too."

"Oh, my child!" exclaimed Mrs. Montague, "your mother doesn't want to see an old woman when she looks at the portrait of her daughter—a sort of dragon watching over you."

"No," Virginia pleaded. "You're a friend of mother's, you see. She would always be reminded of the good times I had with you, and that would make her happy."

Peter was quite convinced that her real reason for wanting Mrs. Montague in the picture was her aversion to posing for him alone. She had been talking to Mrs. Montague as if Peter had been miles away, and he was growing tired of the slight.

"I think Virginia is afraid of posing for me," he said bluntly, whereupon Virginia turned pale and threw him a swift, angry glance.

"I shall go with you to the studio, anyway," said Mrs. Montague. "It will amuse me to watch."

"The studio?" exclaimed Virginia, in frank astonishment. "I supposed he would paint us here, just as he painted you on the veranda of Mira Mare."

"The light isn't good enough anywhere," explained Mrs. Montague, "and, besides, you wouldn't be as undisturbed here as in Green Shore."

"You don't want paint on these rugs, do you?" said Peter, a little gruffly, for he was piqued at being referred to as "he."

Virginia made no reply, and after more persuasion on Mrs. Montague's part, she consented to have a portrait painted of herself alone. Peter was to begin next week, and then work strenuously every morning, except on the Saturdays reserved for little Daisy and her dog.

"What shall I wear?" asked Virginia, resigned.

"That wine-colored scarf," said Peter, whereupon Virginia blushed, remembering, no doubt, her skirmishes at the theater on the only night when Peter could have seen that scarf.

"The world is all colors for Mr. Loring," said Mrs. Montague.

"Then he will have a sad time with such a colorless subject," said Virginia. "But I'll wear the scarf, if you like, else my portrait might be called 'The Gray Miss Grey.'"

"And a spangled fan you must have," said Peter. "I want to paint 'The Gay Miss Grey.'"

Peter went home that day with resentment in his heart against Virginia. Why was she so peevish, cold and unkind when he had done nothing to offend her? Why did she seem to take pleasure in stabbing him with delicate thrusts? Whenever he thought of her now, he saw her laughing gaily with Harold, tossing back her head jauntily and playing with her fan, and as he thought of her with more and more resentment, there crept into her face a cold and heartless look, which he might never have really seen, but which could no longer be effaced from the picture in his mind.

Then Peter began to wonder why Mrs. Montague wanted him to paint Virginia's portrait at all. Was it, perhaps, because his patroness wanted an excuse for spending her mornings at Peter's studio, and could not, without seeming ridiculous, order another portrait of herself? This thought Peter dismissed angrily as altogether too conceited, but it kept sneaking back into his mind.

When the day came that brought Virginia actually into his studio, and she sat facing him on a high armchair with the bright wine-colored scarf draped over her shoulders and the spangled fan in one hand, it was not Virginia's face as he saw it before him, tired and expressionless from the strain of posing, that prompted his hands to quick inspired work, but the face in his memory with its careless, provoking laugh. Mrs. Montague meanwhile was lounging on the divan and, as Peter was working in tense silence, talked with Virginia, but occasionally darted a remark at Peter. How different this sitting was from the one at Mira Mare, when he had been alone with Mrs. Montague and the sea! If he could have been alone with Virginia while he was painting her, who knew but that

they might have become good friends again! But how could they talk simply when Mrs. Montague, who could never guess their covenant made in Miss Clarissa's garden, was looking on and idly making conversation!

Or, if he could paint Mrs. Montague over again, what enchanting hours he might have had with her in the intimate simplicity of his studio, away from the distracting background of her city house—a page holding a tryst with his queen!

Virginia alone or Mrs. Montague alone! Peter painted away with a disappointed sense of lost opportunity, but in his silent anger his work progressed more swiftly than it was wont to do during more cheerful sittings, and when the morning was over, Peter was astonished at the amount he had done. The next morning Mrs. Montague—perhaps discouraged by Peter's silence—brought a novel to read aloud to Virginia, and the reading continued throughout the week. Meanwhile Peter copied his model's features and the bright color of her scarf and the silvery glitter of the spangles on her fan, but as soon as the sitting was over, the Virginia of his inward sight, the Virginia as he had seen her that memorable night at the theater posed for him in the sober Virginia's stead, and the blank eyes were infused with a reckless sparkling, the stiff neck became agile and seemed to bend, there was moisture on the lips that had been severe, and they began to open with spirited laughter. But about her mouth and her forehead mysterious lines began to grow under his hands, lines that spoke in sly, insinuating whispers of callous coquetry and heartless cruelty. The first time that Virginia had seen the transformation of her picture, she had exclaimed:

"Oh, you've changed me since I posed! That isn't the way I sat for you!"

"That's the only way you live in my mind," Peter had replied; whereupon Virginia had been silent and sullen for the rest of the morning.

But Mrs. Montague had praised the portrait.

"You don't need a model at all!" she had said. "The models in your mind pose much better than live ones. What are we here for?"

And Peter had continued to paint the picture in his mind to Mrs. Montague's amusement and Virginia's silent rage. When a week was over, he dismissed his unwilling model and kept on painting the portrait quite from memory. All day he would paint at it, as much as his other work permitted, and at night it pursued him in his dreams. At last came the moment when Peter knew that he would not improve it by another stroke of his brush, and he stepped back to look at it coolly—as if he were seeing it for the first time. Who was this gay, sprightly creature with the mirthless laugh? Was this the fairy friend of his childhood? Was this the lady of the garden, the singer of the song with strange words that dispelled the mist in his heart with a glow of radiant light? No, this was a gay, silly coquette! Was it fair, when one was given a book to translate, to twist the words into a wrong meaning? Should he blot it all out? The artist in his heart said: "No, though it was painted in bitterness and the outcome is unkind, it is one of the best pieces of work you have done, and the colors are first-rate!"

So in the ardor of the moment, Peter telephoned to Mrs. Montague to tell her that the portrait which she had ordered was completed, and Mrs. Montague prom-

ised to come to the studio with Virginia on that very same day.

Peter received the two ladies with some misgivings. Mrs. Montague whisked up her lorgnette and had scarcely shot at the picture one long, keen glance, when she exclaimed:

"Oh, but that's excellent, Mr. Loring! Really, very piquant."

But Virginia started at her likeness and grew pale.

"What do you think of it, Virginia?" asked Mrs. Montague.

There was a painful silence; then Virginia spoke, lamely:

"I like the scarf and the dress and the fan," she began, slowly, and then cried out passionately: "But I hate myself!"

"Why, my dear!" cried Mrs. Montague, and fixed her sharp glance through her lorgnette on Virginia instead of her picture. "What do you mean? Of course, it only gives you in one mood, but the picture certainly has a great deal of piquancy and charm."

"Oh, of course," said Virginia, lapsing back into mundane politeness, "and mother will be ever so pleased."

Mrs. Montague sat down on the divan and talked pleasantly with Peter, first about the picture, then all manner of bright gossip. A wicked thought flitted through Peter's brain: was the worldly woman glad that he had not painted Virginia too lovely in her youth? That would be petty, indeed, and yet it might be . . .

Virginia meanwhile sat with her back to her portrait and never said a word. Her sullenness was childish, no doubt, but it gave Peter a pang of remorse. Was all now

over between him and Virginia? Was the bond of Miss Clarissa's garden broken?

When Mrs. Montague took her leave, Virginia shook hands with him too, but silently, and on the threshold broke out into the short reckless laugh that he had held fast on canvas; but her eyes were sad. She turned away, and Peter knew that he and Virginia were friends no more.

The presence of the picture in his studio annoyed him, and the next morning it was packed and sent to Mrs. Montague's. Then, when it was gone, Peter was aware of a void during his work, and he grew homesick for the irritating picture. The days passed in dreary routine, the nights in melancholy brooding.

One night when a rough wind was beating against the window-pane, and Peter was reading the paper by the fire crackling in his studio, his eye, as it grazed the column of "Social Events" fell on a notice that made his pulse leap: "Mrs. Montague is giving a farewell dance tonight for her niece, Miss Grey, who has been spending the season with her, and who is expecting to leave tomorrow."

So Virginia was dancing this very minute, while he sat shivering in his lonely studio, dancing madly with Harold, with—Oh, he did not even know who they were, all these "young men" among whom he, though he was their age, was never counted! Was it from habit that he was not invited to a dance with Harold's friends, or had Virginia asked to have him slighted? She was waltzing now, surely, with sprightly steps and her head held high—or, perhaps, some dull, insipid fellow was fanning her with the glittering fan that he had painted. . . .

He was not wanted where youth was merry and at play!

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Where did he belong? He was not sought by his colleagues, and his rejected landscape was mocking him like a spectral film on the wall. He was lonely.

The flames in the fireplace had died down; only the smouldering embers were still aglow. The room was chilly, for gusts of wind swept in through the cracks in the window. Peter was cold and deserted; with whom in this great city did he belong?

As Peter stooped to pick up the paper that had slid to the floor, he brushed against the table by the hearth, and a sheet of note-paper fluttered in among the embers. He looked down and saw that it was a letter from Mrs. Montague. The piece of note-paper blazed up for a moment, then nothing was left but ashes.

CHAPTER IX

THE VISION GROWS PALE

WHAT a joy to be at home again! The brisk salt air, the scent of the late syringas stealing through it, the singing of birds, the serene quiet of the shady streets were cooling and restful to Peter's spirit after the dust and hurry and weariness of the city in the first summer's heat. He was strolling back from the harbor, where he had watched the fishermen's boats from the pier like any loafer, and his mind was empty, except for an exquisite sense of being content with the air and the chirping of crickets and the cool shadows on the tender green. There was only one other live being on the drowsy street, and that was a fantastic figure clad in purple and yellow, who came tripping toward Peter.

"Oh, Miss Runkle, how do you do?" Peter greeted his first teacher, whom he had not seen since last summer.

Miss Runkle's profuse hair was gray now, and her cheerful face was a network of wrinkles, no doubt from too many amiable smiles.

"Oh, Mr. Loring!" she exclaimed—"Peter" had been dropped long ago—"I am proud to know you—and what is more, I am proud that such a popular painter was my pupil once. I can hardly believe it."

"Oh, you flatter me," Peter protested.

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"No, indeed," returned Miss Runkle. "From what I have heard, it seems that the ladies have simply been chasing after you to get their portraits painted."

"But, you see," said Peter, trying to approach her pitch of amiability, "those ladies are not like you—they are no artists, they can't tell good painting from bad painting."

"Mrs. Montague can, surely," said Miss Runkle.

"Oh, yes," said Peter. "There are exceptions, of course. But at any rate, none of them are active artists like you, Miss Runkle."

Miss Runkle blushed as if Peter had been the master and she the pupil, and Peter had pity for her.

"Give my best regards to your dear mother," she said, before passing on, "and tell her I was proud to meet her son."

Peter laughed to himself as he walked on, thinking how easy it was to impress the Misses Fanny Runkles of this world. If Virginia were only so easily dazzled!

Perhaps it was a familiar light laugh that had made Virginia flash into his mind even before he caught sight of her as she turned into the street with Dick and Elsie Robins and Timothy Simpkins. Like a damsel in a Watteau picture she looked in her white dress and shady hat with flowers, and she was laughing merrily with her companions. Peter crossed the street and shook hands with each in turn, and all, except Dick whom he had seen the day before, welcomed him back in his home. Even Virginia said that she was glad to see him again, but she spoke in a tone of colorless, fluent cordiality, such as anyone might have used, and in her glance there was no warmth to make him believe that her estrangement was over.

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"We want to have some real good times together this summer," said Elsie Robins, in her high little voice. "Dick has vacation now, too."

"Peter can take his vacation whenever he likes," said Dick; "he is a free man."

"Oh, I never have vacation," returned Peter. "But I want to have some jolly, good times, too. I'm tired of the city; it's fine to be here again."

The merry group passed on with chattering and laughter, and Peter walked home wondering whether he should find his old merriment again.

"I just met Elsie Robins and Virginia," he said to his mother, who was sewing by the library window.

"Oh, poor Virginia!" exclaimed Peter's mother, and sewed on.

"Why, poor Virginia?" Peter asked in astonishment, for Virginia was the last in Gullport whom he should have pitied.

"You're right! why poor Virginia?" his mother responded. "It doesn't seem as if she had any excuse to be dissatisfied, now that her mother is so much better and she can live at home."

"Perhaps she would rather not live at home," said Peter. "Besides, how do you know that she isn't satisfied?"

"Her mother told me," was the reply. "Eleanor Grey came here the other day and said: 'How I wish I could find a congenial companion for Virginia. Although she seems to be having good times, she complains that she has nothing in common with the other young people here, and says she is lonely.' Would you believe it, Peter? Doesn't it seem rather ungrateful?"

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"I shouldn't say that," answered Peter, and walked away wondering how one could be unhappy and yet laugh so merrily with Timothy Simpkins.

Peter decided not to call on Virginia that night, because, after all, in spite of her bland words this morning, they were still on frosty terms; he would wait until to-morrow evening.

The next night a big, full moon sent its balmy rays of cool light onto the gardens that had been scorched by fiery sunbeams during the long June day. The townspeople who had hidden from the sun behind green shutters now poured out of the houses to stroll in the moonlight and the faint sea breeze. Peter walked briskly through the meandering groups, lest he should be called back and drawn into leisurely conversation. As he approached Virginia's house, he caught sounds of piano playing: Virginia, no doubt, was practicing, and perhaps she would sing to him once more. The nearer he came, the gayer the music sounded: dance music, it was, sprightly, swift and gay.

From the Greys' piazza sounded the rhythmic shuffling of feet on the floor; silhouettes of dancers were flitting hither and thither in the moonlight, and through the open window between the porch and the living-room Peter saw, as in a bright picture framed by the half darkness round about, Mrs. Grey, the beautiful lady of his childhood, playing on the piano with deft, slender hands, while her face in its serene, classic beauty seemed to defy the gay caprice of her own music. Peter wondered in this moment why he had never wanted to paint Virginia's mother, nor even desired to paint her now: she was too much a work of art herself, her beauty too nearly perfect

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to be enhanced on canvas. But Virginia . . . where was she now? Dancing with one of these shadowy figures on the piazza? A most deplorable way of being unhappy this was, a lamentable way of being lonely!

The waltz stopped and Virginia's light and sprightly laugh rippled through the sudden hush. Poor, poor Virginia! Peter felt as if she had played a trick on him, though, in truth, she was innocent enough and could not have guessed that he had come to console her for a want of congenial spirits. Would there be a swarm of indifferent people about her in Gullport, as in Boston, when he wanted to see Virginia?

This was Peter's state of mind as he stood unobserved at the fence of the Greys' yard, and in his disappointment he turned sullenly away. As he walked back through the streets peopled with merry idlers, he suddenly had to laugh at himself in his rôle of disappointed lover slouching away from his beloved's gate in the moonlight. How Virginia herself would laugh if she saw him! Then he wondered, all at once, why she had not asked him to her party on the piazza in the first place, and whether she had slighted him on purpose. He must find this out—he must find her alone.

The next morning Peter started out on a stroll through the town with no special aim, for he was sure of meeting either Dick or Ted Raffles, or some other old friend enjoying vacation, with whom he might have a set of tennis or a sail to the island. A drowsiness was in the air which did not invite to action, but rather to swing in a hammock or to lie on one's back in the sand. There was a sudden breath of syringas; that must come from Miss Clarissa's garden. He looked across the street and saw

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that Miss Clarissa's syringas were indeed still blooming. He walked up to the great spreading bush at the fence and heard a rustling and a crackling of branches.

"Oh, Virginia!" cried Peter. "You here!"

Virginia stepped out from the bushes with a profuse armful of frail white blossoms already scorched, here and there, by the June sun.

"You look startled," she cried, laughing in her elfin way; "perhaps you didn't want to find me in the bushes!"

Yesterday he had sought her and had gone away disappointed; today he had not looked for her at all and found her all alone. But she must not know what a foolish swain he had been last night.

"Seven years ago," he said, abruptly, "you were picking gilly-flowers in this garden."

"Yes," replied Virginia, in a drowsy, reminiscent tone; "that was in August, when all the old-fashioned flowers were out."

"Yes, all the old-fashioned flowers were out," continued Peter, like a refrain; "and you told me about your friend Yvonne and how lonely you were here."

"Oh, yes, you were my confessor," she cried, laughing. "How young and foolish I was!"

"Young and wise, you mean," said Peter, in a school-masterly tone; "you are young still, but I don't think that you're so wise."

"Because I'm not confiding in you any more?" she asked slyly.

"Yes," said Peter firmly.

"What a conceited boy you are!" cried Virginia, laughing.

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Peter did not laugh; he was bound to make Virginia stop her careless laughter.

"Why, isn't it the same now between us," he asked sternly, "as seven years ago? I know my picture of you made you angry, but I only painted it that way in revenge. I don't see why you were so hostile to me. . . ."

"To you?" broke in Virginia, her laughter was gone and her eyes were kindled with new fire. "Was it you? Or was it a strange fop—a ladies' pet? . . . Why, you know, when I came back to my home I thought: now I am going to see Peter of the vision again; I will see him in a garden and will renew our bond. Well, I did see Peter again, but not in a garden, and hardly the Peter of the vision. . . . But I shouldn't talk so much!" she broke off suddenly, with a toss of her head and a short, nervous laugh.

Peter of the vision! One instant it flashed before his inward eye, the vision of blood-red poppies glowing in the sunlight and the sun-bathed golden curls of the child in the midst of their glory. For one instant only the vision clutched his whole heart and made it throb—then it began to grow paler and paler . . . Oh, now he understood the secret of his failure: his vision had grown pale! Once this year, the first night of their meeting in Mrs. Montague's house, Virginia, by her song with strange words, had waked the vision that lay pale and slumbering in the forgotten depth of his spirit back again to bright and glowing life! But she had sung to him only once, and the vision had faded again. Peter would not confess to Virginia these contrite meditations of his heart; so he was silent.

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The fragrance of the syringas was growing heavy, and the air seemed weighed down by the silence.

"Perhaps you are angry now—" Virginia began slowly.

"No," said Peter severely; "of course not. . . . But you shall find that the Peter of the vision is not dead."

She looked up at him with a half-incredulous, half-inspired glance that faded in an instant, even as his vision had lost its glow. Then she began to break off branches again, as if they had been conversing in a polite and mundane fashion, and because Peter understood this as a sign for him to leave, he said good-by blandly and went his way.

The vision, he said to himself, must lose its pallor, and in its pristine glory stay gleaming in his heart. He was free now, free from the fetters of patronesses and fashion, free with the woods, the rocks and the tide! He would turn to Nature again, his old teacher and friend, who had been kind to him from his earliest childhood on, who had spread out her beauty before his eyes like a spendthrift always, though he had turned away to dusty city streets and pale old women in tinsel-laden houses.

Before he was aware of his route, Peter had left the outskirts of Gullport and entered the woods and was now aiming toward the hermitage. Mr. Woodfin was sitting on a tree stump in front of his cottage, smoking his pipe.

"Good morning, Mr. Woodfin!"

"'Morning, Peter."

"Mr. Woodfin, I've come to ask," said Peter, "if you'd mind if I went sketching with you every day?"

"Come on!" replied the man of the woods. "Why

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should I mind! Only I thought you'd be busy painting ladies' portraits."

"No," said Peter eagerly. "I've made up my mind, I don't want to do any more portraits this summer. I want to paint one big landscape, so that I'll have something to show at the end of the summer. I don't know yet what subject—so I want to make a great many sketches before I decide."

Peter did not know of this resolution until the moment when he told Mr. Woodfin; it must have formed in his mind mysteriously while he was walking through the woods.

"That's fine!" said Mr. Woodfin. "We can start out tomorrow; I'm going to Parker's Landing to do some of the dories there at low tide. Will that suit you?"

"First-rate," said Peter. "Perhaps we can get one of the loafers there to pose for us in a boat with a net."

"Perhaps . . . I'm not so keen on figures though, in my sketches. Anyway, come with me whenever you like; you're welcome."

Peter could not wait for the dawning of the next day, so eager was he to begin the work again that was most truly his own in the company of his old teacher. And indeed, when he was working in preoccupied silence with Mr. Woodfin once more, it seemed as if the long season in Boston had been the dream of a nap in a hammock.

Every morning Peter started out early with easel and paint-box, often to meet Mr. Woodfin on an appointed spot, always to chase ardently in a rough sketch some dazzling gleam of light on the waves, some bright disarray of fishing boats in the harbor, some mysterious shadow on the fields. Weeks slipped by before he had

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decided on the subject for the one great picture that he wanted to work out in detail with utmost care, but finally he chose one sketch as his theme, a stretch of the beach below Mira Mare at lowest tide, with reflections of elusive tints gleaming on the wet sand as the curling waves recede. Mr. Woodfin, who was making a study of the great rock on the very same beach, accompanied Peter and gave him advice for the starting of the large work on which he set his heart. As the time of low tide changed, Peter came to the beach at different hours of the day, and he formed his plans for each day round his big picture as the dominating center.

One morning when the sea was a piercing blue shade and the turquoise sky was mirrored steely blue in the gleaming sand, Peter was distracted from his swift work by a white figure that was coming down the stairway in the rock to the beach.

Mrs. Montague was back again! She had been visiting in the mountains throughout June and had left Peter undistracted in his rustic, work-a-day frame of mind. Now she was coming toward him on the beach with her green sun-shade, and in another moment she would speak to him in that crisp, cymbal voice of hers that would draw his mind away.

"Painting the sea for variety?" the dreaded voice began. "How many handsome ladies will be jealous of the ocean!"

Peter rose and pretended to be quite startled by her sudden visit. Mrs. Montague gave a cold, condescending nod to Mr. Woodfin who was sketching near by, and went on talking to Peter.

"Why didn't you start your picture on our veranda?"

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she said cordially. "You're welcome to paint there any morning, you know. At any rate, you can leave your canvas there, to save your dragging it back and forth across the causeway."

"You're very kind," said Peter. "But you see, I want to paint the reflections on the beach especially; so I have to be down here on the sand. As for leaving the canvas with you—you're really too good, but I make changes at home: so I have to take it back with me."

The truth was that Peter did not want to begin again to be entangled in the meshes of her delicate web.

"This looks very promising—it's a big undertaking, isn't it?" she said of his painting.

"Yes," said Peter. "I'm going to work on it all summer, if I can't make it perfect before!"

"Oh, such ardor!" exclaimed Mrs. Montague. "And I supposed you would take a nice little vacation. I'm going to ask some of the ladies you know down for week-ends, and they will want to see you. I hope you will give me the pleasure often. By the way, how do you like my new balcony?"

Workmen had been busy on Mira Mare during the absence of its mistress, and the outcome was a balcony from the upper story, like a turret overlooking the sea.

"I've been admiring it," said Peter dutifully. "You'll look farther out over the sea than anyone else for miles around."

"Yes, our cottage will be a true Mira Mare," she replied. "And I'm going to decorate the balcony with palms from my greenhouse and make it quite an idyllic Italian retreat; you will want to paint it, I'm sure. I should read Dante to you while you were painting."

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"I've no doubt that would be very charming," said Peter. "But somehow, I've gone back to wild nature."

Mrs. Montague smiled ironically.

"May you be faithful to Dame Nature," she said. "But don't neglect the other ladies for her sake!"

She made a light bow and passed on along the beach, calling to her fox-terrier which had run after her from Mira Mare. Peter sighed deeply when she was gone.

"Don't like to have ladies butting in when you're at work, do you?" asked Mr. Woodfin, with a friendly laugh.

"Oh, I don't mind," said Peter blandly, but he was really fearing that he might not mind enough, and that he might be lured again to Mira Mare, to suave discourse and the parlor-art that had no kinship with the sunlight and the sea. What would Virginia say? How could the vision in his heart that had grown so pale win back its glow on the ornate balcony of his patroness?

"Tell me something about Jack! How is he getting on?" Peter asked his old teacher suddenly, to escape from thoughts of Mrs. Montague.

"Finely, finely!" Mr. Woodfin replied. "I had a letter from him this morning. And you know what he says in it? Well, he says: 'Tell Loring to come here next fall; Munich's the only place for a painter.'"

"So he hasn't forgotten me!" said Peter. "That's good of him. Do tell me something about his life."

"It's a hard-working life," said Mr. Woodfin. "But it's a mighty jolly life too. He's living right in the thick of painters, sculptors, designers, and musicians, too, I guess. They live kind of a rough life, I suppose, in their

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studios, but they have gay times enough. This letter Jack wrote at four o'clock in the morning after a studio lark. He doesn't say any more about it."

Peter had dropped his right arm to his side and was listening with complete attention.

"Who knows," he muttered half to himself, "but that Munich would be the best place for me too."

"You'd know more artists than you do in Gullport, surely," said Mr. Woodfin. "Here you only know your old teacher, who hasn't got a theory to his name and just paints away——"

"He paints away mighty well," interrupted Peter.

"But when you were in Boston this winter," Mr. Woodfin went on, "you might have known quite a number."

"I might have," said Peter inanely. "But I didn't."

Jack Woodfin's letter did not leave Peter's mind for days, and he began to think of himself in the artists' quarter in Munich. He did not speak to his father and mother about it, although as an independent artist he no longer had to fear the humiliation of begging for a favor unwillingly granted. Peter's mother was now as proud of him as if he were a successful lawyer and her only fear was that he might grow spoilt in Boston; Peter's father was no longer reproachful, although he was still wondering how a son of his had come to choose such an exotic vocation. He had given Peter books on history and philosophy, no doubt to counteract the frivolity of painting, and Peter had read them and talked them over in his father's library, quite as if he had been a college-bred man.

But for all the tranquil harmony in his home, Peter's

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father and mother would not understand why one should leave a prosperous career so near one's family for uncertainty in a foreign land. He could not even explain this to himself; he only knew that the vision in his heart had grown pale, and that if he continued on the broad, pleasant road on which he had started, the vision would fade altogether. Thus dimly aware of a danger that no one else in Gullport, except Virginia, could perceive, he kept postponing his call at Mira Mare. As Virginia avoided seeing him alone—perhaps because she regretted her outbreak in the garden, perhaps because he was not yet redeemed enough in her eyes from the offence of being "different" that had shocked her—and as he had little desire for gaieties after his season in Boston, Peter spent most of his evenings at home in the library. The days passed with work or tennis and water sports with his old schoolmates, so that the readiness for the amiable light conversation that had been on his lips so much in the city was now a lost art for Peter.

"I met Mrs. Montague," said Peter's mother one day. "And she asked why you hadn't been to see her. You ought to have gone long ago, Peter! You mustn't forget all that she has done for you!"

To be sure, Peter was growing ungrateful, and he must go to see Mrs. Montague that very afternoon. So he told Mr. Woodfin that he would not sketch the birch grove in the woods today, and when the town clock had struck four, he set out for Mira Mare.

"Why, Mr. Loring, I thought you were faithless!" Mrs. Montague greeted him breezily.

The sunlight was streaming into her parlor and play-

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ing on her bracelets and long chain of jade and seemed to be reflected like a steely gleam from her lucid green eyes. The portrait painter's heart, so long subdued, leaped within him, and the courtier's tongue, so long charmed, was loosened all at once.

"I assure you, I don't understand why I haven't been here before," he said eagerly. "If I had been in my right mind, I should have called here every day. But you see, I have been steeped in work."

Mrs. Montague looked at him with a skeptical smile.

"More than in Boston?" she asked slyly.

"No, but it's different with landscapes," said Peter. "The sea won't come to your studio, and you have to make use of the light as long as you can. But unfortunately I can't talk with the sea as pleasantly as I could with you when I painted your portrait."

"Oh, the conversation of the sea is safe enough," said Mrs. Montague. "But if you associate continually with that Mr. Woodcock or Mr. Woodchuck—aren't you a little afraid of turning into a bear?"

Now was the time to stand up for his old teacher, as he had failed to do when his haughty patroness had made sport of him once before.

"Mr. Woodfin is a first-class landscape painter," said Peter with some effort, for it was always distasteful to contradict Mrs. Montague. "It's his misfortune that he isn't better known."

"It is nobody's misfortune if he isn't known," said Mrs. Montague with an air of finality. "It is always his own fault. Anyone who amounts to something is sure to be discovered. I don't believe in obscure greatness."

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Peter, well aware that it was Mrs. Montague who had discovered him, remained silent.

"You must come up and see the new balcony!" said his patroness, briskly dispelling the shadow that had fallen on their discourse.

Peter followed her up two flights of stairs and then out onto the new balcony.

"A little Italian garden, high up in the air, isn't it, Mr. Loring?"

"Oh, you should sit under that palm in a dress of a gorgeous Medici green—that would make a picture!"

Mrs. Montague laughed gaily.

"You seem to have guessed why I lured you up here," she said. "I have been thinking lately that I should rather like to appease a vain and fantastic whim and have myself painted with this romantic background. Don't look frightened, Peter. I don't want another real portrait like the one you made last summer! No, this is to be more a genre picture of the balcony and its Italian atmosphere, and if possible, to suggest the width of the view."

Peter felt the tentacles of his old life—the life that he had cast off that June day in Miss Clarissa's garden—grasp him with their tender, but adhesive hold, and he knew that if he did not tear them off now at the beginning, they would grow and wind round him and drag him down—not into an abyss, to be sure, but into a carpeted mansion where scarlet visions grew pale.

The balcony was indeed enchanting, an Italian garden floating high over the endless stretch of deep-blue sea. Palms, oleander and formal round bay trees in pots

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made an artificial grove, and scarlet geraniums, blue petunias and fuchsias with nodding bells, planted on the railing in vine-covered boxes, gleamed brightly against the even blue of the sky. In a corner, under a palm tree, was an ornamental basin with goldfish and on the wicker table stood a vase in form of a Cupid with a quiver. Mrs. Montague, as she stood by the railing, looking over the water, seemed to Peter some Italian Duchess who was resting from heated revels in the cool of her shady garden. What a dainty picture he could make of this balcony with its mistress—a rococo picture, a graceful, ornamental picture with a formal charm! The deep-blue ocean should gleam in the background.

The ocean as background to a toy of an Italian balcony! The idea suddenly shocked Peter as he remembered that he had set his heart on perfecting his great serious picture of the beach and the sea.

"You are silent, my friend the painter," said Mrs. Montague, waking him out of his meditation.

She laid her hand lightly on his arm, and with her green eyes looked keenly into Peter's, as if she would read his most clandestine thought.

Should he yield? Hours of exquisite intimate discourse stole into his imagination, enchanting tête-à-têtes in this airy retreat high above the sea: should he say "yes"? What would become of his sea-picture? He could not do both in the same period of time, because to paint the reflections on the beach he had to be ready at any time of day to obey the dictates of the changing tide. So he would have to leave his sea picture for a time, if he should paint Mrs. Montague now,

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for he knew her impatience and her demand that, once in her service, he should not divide his attention between herself and any other subject, even if that other be the ocean.

"Still silent?" remarked Mrs. Montague.

Her face was very near to his; a fragrance rose from her hair. In one instant it was over: he had kissed Mrs. Montague on her lips! Then startled, as if waking out of a moment's delirium, he was afraid that he might have forfeited the favor of his patroness forever. Humbly he glanced into her eyes, but they were strangely calm as if nothing had happened, except for the old gleam of triumph imperfectly subdued.

"You will paint the picture?" she said in a low firm voice.

The picture! The woman beside him had made Peter forget the main issue. Only three minutes ago he had resolved not to yield. Was it already too late? If he refused to fulfill her wish, she had good cause now to be angry and break with him altogether—and that he could not bear. But if he obeyed . . . after this moment of rapture, ~~what~~ moments would follow? Even out of her sight, there would be no peace for him from tempestuous thoughts of Mrs. Montague; her fine-spun net would enmesh him, and he would be her slave. Could he still refuse? One step farther, and he could never go back. He must break off harshly.

"Forgive me—please forgive me!" he stammered. "I made a kind of vow to myself that I wouldn't start any other work until my sea picture was done—until I couldn't improve it with another stroke of my brush! I

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‘don’t think that you would be so cruel and want me to break my vow!’

Mrs. Montague recoiled as if Peter had touched her hand with hot iron. But in the next moment she looked at him with a cold, sarcastic smile.

“No, I wouldn’t have you break your vow,” she said coolly. “So I suppose my balcony scene must wait till your sea picture is absolutely perfect. But when that perfection has been attained, perhaps you will condescend to paint me.”

“I don’t want to promise anything,” said Peter, roused to resistance by her irony. “I made up my mind to devote this summer to landscape painting and I don’t want to make any rash promises. You have no idea how hard it is for me to refuse you!”

“Oh, very well—it’s of no consequence!” said Mrs. Montague icily and led him down from the balcony. The silence on the stairs that they had ascended so gaily was chilling. At the house-door Peter wanted to seize the hand of his patroness penitently, but she drew it away and turned round abruptly with a sharp “Good-by!”

It was all over—the woman who had made his career thought him ungrateful and disloyal—and after that moment of forgetful rapture, too! Peter felt all this like a dull pain and yet he drew a deep sigh of relief as if he had escaped a siren—an enticing siren who required not only ears to be stopped up, but eyes to be bandaged. Now he would work at his sea picture with double zest, without distraction, with his whole heart!

And this Peter did until, on the first day of August, he stepped back and said to Mr. Woodfin:

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"Is this picture done?"

"I say it's done," replied Mr. Woodfin. "You can't improve it by another stroke."

"I think it's done too," said Peter, and carried his masterpiece home with a secret sense of triumph.

It was always a little chilling not to have anyone in the house who knew what was good; but after all, Mr. Woodfin's approval and his own satisfaction were enough for the present. In the middle of the sunny, languid afternoon, when there were few townspeople abroad, Peter carried the picture, face outward because the paint was still fresh, through the streets and into his house. As he heard men's voices indistinctly from the library, he started to carry his treasure into his own room, where the indifferent who came to the house would not annoy him with inane comments.

"Peter!" called his father. "Mr. Atherton is here!"

Maurice Atherton was in Gullport! No other caller would have been welcome in this moment, but to him Peter flew, still holding his painting in his hand.

"Well, well—your latest work? The paint still fresh!" exclaimed Atherton, when they had barely shaken hands. "I am really more eager to see this than to see you!"

"It's my better self," said Peter, happy to have found an excellent critic.

"Isn't that a little strong?" said Peter's father, putting on his spectacles to look at his son's oversoul in the form of a painted beach and ocean.

But Peter's eyes hung on Atherton's lips as on an oracle's.

"This is the best you have done," spoke the oracle

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at last. "It is ten times better than any of your ladies' portraits. That reflection on the beach is first-rate and the wild geese flying give the whole thing a romantic air. That is good, inspired work, Peter, and I advise you to keep to landscape painting as long as you can."

Peter was too happy to make any reply.

"I am glad to hear this praise from you, Mr. Atherton," said Peter's father, "because I trust your judgment."

Maurice Atherton had just been on the point of leaving when Peter came, and he had to return now to Mira Mare where he was visiting for a few days.

"I'll walk back with you," said Peter, and accompanied Atherton to Green Shore.

"I hope I may see you much oftener next year," said Peter. "If I am in Boston again in the autumn, I don't want to squander so much time in inane society. I'd rather smoke with you and get your ideas."

"Now unfortunately," replied Maurice Atherton, "I shall leave for Europe in October. I am going to give a series of lectures at Oxford in November, and I have taken a leave of absence for the rest of the year to write my 'Outlines of Philosophy' in leisure. I shall work at Oxford probably, for a month or two, and then go down to Munich——"

"To Munich!" Peter cried out, and stood still in the middle of the street. "Why, that's an omen!"

And Peter told Atherton about Jack Woodfin and his advice and how he himself had considered a flight to Munich away from his patronesses and his pallid art.

"Go!" said Atherton when he had listened with marked attention. "Go to Munich! That is what you

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need: the sea in summer, and in winter unsparing critics and life in an air saturated with art. You see,"—Maurice Atherton smiled a rare, enigmatic smile,—“you are not one of those natures who, in the midst of a noisy, restless throng, will float alone on a pool of beauty, serene and undisturbed; your boat must be driven hither and thither by many winds, but I believe that it will pass unharmed through the wildest storm and reach its harbor triumphant.”

“Oh, why do I need to have such a stormy time!” exclaimed Peter. “Why can’t I float on a pool of beauty everywhere—like you?”

They had reached Mira Mare, and Peter left his companion and walked homeward by a round-about way. Atherton’s prophecy was working in his mind, and the philosopher’s praise was making his pulse beat swiftly. If Atherton and Jack Woodfin both thought that Munich was the place for him, and if he had an instinctive sense that they were right—why should he not go? He must go! It would be hard for his mother, but she had no right to expect that her son could stay in her neighborhood always. He would not see Virginia for almost a year, and who knew what she might not do in that time? That was a consideration indeed. But Virginia had been so cold to him since that one sunny day in Miss Clarissa’s garden; he was not yet redeemed in her eyes—and what could redeem him better than a year of hard and inspired work and the bold achievement for which he hoped? Then he would come back as a great painter and win his beloved! Had she not waked him out of his winter sleep and shown him how his vision had grown pale?

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What would Mrs. Montague say? It shocked Peter suddenly that he dreaded his parting from Mrs. Montague more than absence from Virginia, the one love of his boyhood and youth. Could this be possible? But the fine threads that his patroness had spun round him during the winters when he had been the lapdog of her fancy had bound him fast in spite of the rupture on the balcony. Now that his sea picture was finished, he had no excuse for refusing her rococo picture any longer. Then, if he should start on this alluring task, he knew what would follow: he would meet the insipid guests at Mira Mare, receive new orders for the winter and a long list of vague invitations. Not only the temptress herself, but all her train would rob his freedom!

No—he would not let it come to that! He would leave now before he could begin the rococo picture, while his will was free! He would declare to his father this very day that he must go, and sail next week. So Peter made plans for his journey: he would travel a little through Germany before he settled down in Munich, for he was an independent artist now—not a student sent by his father; and then he would take a studio somewhere near Jack Woodfin and begin his new life.

When Peter came home, he found that his father and mother had gone for a walk, and to his relief, he could make plans a little longer in luxurious secrecy. He searched for an old atlas in the library—his only Baedeker was one of France—and bent over a map of Bavaria, until a touch on his shoulder called him back from his airy travels.

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"What are you studying the old atlas for?" asked Peter's father in a placid, kindly tone. "Are you planning a journey?"

Peter nodded soberly.

"Why—where do you want to go?" asked Peter's father, evidently astonished by his son's seriousness. Peter's father and mother never had any desire to travel, and it always seemed to them something unnatural when any of the townspeople preferred another abode, if only for a few months, to Gullport. So Peter sighed a little wearily before he answered:

"I want to go to Munich for the winter."

"To Munich!" exclaimed his father. "To Munich!"

He sank into his armchair, took off his spectacles, rubbed them with his handkerchief and put them on again.

"Why do you want to go to a foreign country," he asked, "when you are started so well in Boston here? You said yourself that you had more orders last year than you ever dreamed you would have and that you had prospects for many more next winter. Who knows you in Munich?"

"Jack Woodfin, for one," said Peter. "He wanted me to go there in the first place. And your friend Atherton advised me most ardently to go there. He is going to be in Munich himself next winter."

"Atherton has always led an erratic life," said Peter's father. "He is not rooted anywhere—he has no home ties. But why you, with your home so near your work, should want to go to a foreign country, I don't understand."

How could Peter's father understand, when he had

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not yet understood what an artist was—how could Peter make it clear?

"If I were a young clergyman somewhere near home," he began, "and if I were called to another parish—would you say I ought to refuse because it would be wrong to go away?"

"But this isn't a call," replied Peter's father. "This is only a whim, as far as I can see."

"It isn't a whim at all," said Peter. "It is a serious decision; I want to go simply because I know I should do much better work there."

"But I understand your work is good now," his father returned. "I thought the ladies you painted were satisfied——"

Peter winced at the word "ladies" and exclaimed:

"But I'm not satisfied, and that's the main point! And I haven't any name among my colleagues. And I know Munich will be a better place to work in—besides, I should probably come back in summer."

"Well, you are independent now," said Peter's father, resigned. "We have no right to keep you at home. All I can say is that I am sorry, Peter, and I cannot understand. There's your mother! Mary," he said to Peter's mother who came in timidly, as she always did when she found her husband and son in serious conversation, "Peter wants to leave us and go to Munich!"

A cloud swept over the face of Peter's mother, and it was even harder for Peter to win her approval than his father's. When he said at last that he wanted to sail next week so that he might travel a little and yet be established at his new studio in September, tears were glistening in his mother's eyes. How he would

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have liked to tell her that it was not for the pleasure of a little traveling that he wanted to leave her so soon, but for reasons more potent—reasons, alas, that she could not understand! Instead, he laughed and said lightly:

"After all, it won't be any different from the year I was in Paris; you got on very well without me then."

"But I have heard that the artists in Munich lead a very wild Bohemian life," his mother still objected.

"But I'm not an infant, mother," Peter replied. "You must remember I'm twenty-six."

Finally Peter's mother, too, was resigned, and now there remained the most difficult task of all—the refusal to paint Mrs. Montague's picture. In his dreams at night he saw the sinister frown on his patroness' haughty brow and he woke up with a fear that he might be banned from her gracious favor forever.

In the morning he started out for Mira Mare, so that he might find her free from guests and talk with her alone. Mrs. Montague came into the room in a peach-colored negligée of bewildering intricacy, and held an opalescent bowl with water in one hand and in her arms a profusion of roses, which she began to arrange on a little table with effective mock-domesticity. After some bland apologies for his early call, Peter watched her in silence, loathing to begin. The throbbing of his heart seemed like the beating of a drum.

"Well—?" Mrs. Montague raised her eyebrows and looked at him with calm curiosity.

"I've come to tell you," he said lamely at last, "that I'm very sorry I can't paint your picture on the balcony, because I'm going to start for Munich next week."

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Mrs. Montague raised her eyebrows still higher, and continued to play with the roses.

"That's too bad," she said politely. "For how long are you planning your trip?"

"I plan to spend the winter in Munich," Peter replied.

"Indeed!" Mrs. Montague turned round sharply and looked at him with her sarcastic smile. "So we are not going to have the honor this winter! What inspired you with that change of program?"

How should he answer now! Surely not with the truth!

"I thought I ought to try the real artists' life abroad for a while," he said reluctantly.

"A touch of *Bohème*—eh?" mocked Mrs. Montague.

"Yes, I suppose that is it," said Peter meekly.

"Is there such a hurry," she asked, "that you can't paint another picture first?"

What inquisition! How could he tell her that he was fleeing out of her reach?

"I'm sorry," he said awkwardly. "But I have to travel a little—and I have to get settled in my new studio as early as possible."

"So you prefer Munich—" she mused. "A year ago you were not so scornful of my orders!"

This thrust, made in a casual, seemingly absent-minded way, wounded Peter to the quick. How base his ingratitude must seem to her without whose help and kindness he would not now be holding his head high and choosing his own course in the face of opportunity! The adoring page in him woke up to remorse, and longed to throw himself at the feet of his queen.

"Mrs. Montague!" cried Peter, "don't think that I

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value lightly all that you have done for me. I know that you have made my career. Without you, no doubt, I should be a failure today. You don't know how hard it is for me——"

Mrs. Montague raised her hand with a silencing gesture.

"Don't grow melodramatic," she said with humiliating irony on her lips. "You have good reasons, no doubt, for going to Munich, and I should be the last to question you about them. I wish you the best success, and a good voyage."

There was a tone of dismissal in her voice that gave Peter a deep wound. He did not know whether he adored or hated Mrs. Montague. He seized her hand and kissed it in a furious passion.

"I adored you!" he cried. "It breaks my heart to go away. Forgive me—I owe you so much—too much—I thank you a thousand times for——"

"Don't thank me!" she cut him short, and drew her hand away. "Good-by! I hope to have the pleasure when you come back from Munich. My regards to your mother!"

Peter could not go home now, but wandered about dully for over an hour, seeing again with the wide-awake eye of his mind every glance and gesture of Mrs. Montague's, and when he came home he spoke little, but brooded over his grief in bitterness. It seemed as if his life of the last two years lay before his memory in ruins. But as the days elapsed, his sorrow gradually gave way to a sense of relief that he had broken the spell and freed himself from Mrs. Montague's necromancy.

Now there was no other obstacle in his way, for Vir-

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ginia and Atherton and especially Mr. Woodfin would applaud his decision and wish him Godspeed, and Dick and Ted Raffles and Timothy Simpkins, thought they would think him mad for cutting short his summer vacation at home, yet would not hold him back.

So Peter engaged his passage for Thursday of the following week. Then he tormented his old teacher with questions about Jack Woodfin's life in Munich and the hermit seemed proud that Peter was following his son.

"It'll seem like having two sons in Munich," he said in his gruff voice.

Peter gave his masterpiece, the sea picture on which he had worked with such ardor, into Mr. Woodfin's hands that he should send it to his Landscape Society in Boston which had its exhibition in the fall.

"They'll take it surely," commented his teacher.

Peter thought of his dejection in the winter when his landscape had been refused and he gave a sign of relief that he was not going back to his dull studio in Boston, the scene of mundane conversation with bland-faced ladies whose portraits he had to paint. In Munich he would have models after his heart!

At last came the hour when he must say good-by to Virginia. She had been away on a visit and had come back only the day before Peter's departure, perhaps—Peter dared hope—because she had heard from her mother that he was going away.

Peter found her on her porch, swinging in the Gloucester hammock, with a book beside her.

"What are you reading?" he asked, anxious not to make his farewell solemn, lest it should grow too hard for him and too easy for her.

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"'Cyrano,'" she answered. "I always read it once a year. He's one of my best friends."

"I see you can be faithful," remarked Peter, as he perched on the railing beside the hammock.

"You're going away—?" asked Virginia blandly.

"Yes," answered Peter. "I'm going to Munich. Jack Woodfin is there. I'm going to have a studio there too."

"Oh, then you won't have to paint stupid old women any more!" cried Virginia with sudden enthusiasm.

The barrier between them—that uncertain strain that had kept them apart even after the hour in Miss Clarissa's garden—now fell down.

"Yes," said Peter. "I'm going to be a free artist; I am not going to consider a soul——"

"Except your own!" said Virginia.

"I sha'n't even consider that," said Peter with bravado. "Only my art."

Virginia laughed merrily.

"Well," she cried, "you've acquired some *panache* since June."

"'Panache'?" responded Peter. "What does that mean?"

Virginia opened her book and pointed at the last words of the play: "Mon panache!"

"It's what *Cyrano* kept to the last," said Virginia. "It's the plume on his hat—it's what chivalry was made of—it's something absurd, it's a grand kind of foolishness—it is dash—it's a dare-devil kind of joy . . ."

"That's what Jack Woodfin says you get in Munich," said Peter laughing. "Only he didn't say it like that! Well, I knew you would approve of my going, and I'm mighty glad—only I'm a little sorry, too."

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"You want me to miss you—eh?" said Virginia mischievously.

"Yes," said Peter. "I am hoping you will miss me, and when I come back . . . Oh, I have an idea!" he cried out suddenly. "Why don't you go to Munich to study singing—you might as well go there as to Paris . . . Then we'll go to the opera together——"

"Oh, Peter!" Virginia broke in. "What do you think! Father wouldn't let me go away again, now that he has his family back after so many years. And if I do travel, I will have to stay with mother in a languid southern climate. No, I'll have to be content with lessons in Boston once a week."

"How sad!" cried Peter, disappointed. "Anyway, I want you to write me about every song you sing."

"Oh dear!" replied Virginia. "What a task! But then I'm going to be exacting too. I want you to write me about every picture you paint—that's too easy, though, because I could sing hundreds of songs while you paint one picture. No, that isn't enough. So I'm going to ask something else"—her eyes were all at once aglow with a lovely inspired light, and Peter knew in this moment without a doubt that he loved her and that he was going to Munich to be a great artist for her sake—"I'm going to ask you to write me about every vision you see!"

"There is only one vision for me," said Peter. "Pray for me that it may turn bright again over there, because in Boston it has grown quite pale!"

CHAPTER X

THE SCULPTRESS

JACK WOODFIN and Peter sat smoking in the corner of the little café where they were accustomed to meet after supper with a group of artists who would linger over their coffee in spirited debate. Peter had taken pains to learn German fast during his journey up the Rhine, then through the Tyrol and the Bavarian Alps, and now, with Jack Woodfin's help, he had advanced far enough to join in his colleagues' disputes.

"What did we fight about tonight?" Peter asked his companion, for they were alone at their table now. "I've quite forgotten."

"Oh, I don't remember either," replied Jack. "But it doesn't matter. It's good to have disputes—always better than to agree: it's good for one's art."

"Everything in Munich is good for one's art," said Peter.

"So you're satisfied?" asked Jack Woodfin in his gruff voice, with a twinkle in his black eyes.

Peter nodded in content and watched the rings of smoke from his cigarette. The whole room was full of smoke, so that the inmates whose voices made a continuous buzz were but dimly visible, as through a thick veil. From one corner melodious laughter started

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often and died down again, till Peter fixed his eyes in its direction and when the fog of smoke had lifted, saw that it came from the only woman in a group of lively, gesticulating men. Peter looked hard: that pale face with the jet-black hair, that pathetic, wistful profile, that mouth with the drooping corners—when had he dreamed of these? He laid his hand on his forehead and began to think, but just in the very moment when memory illumined his mind, the puzzling woman in the corner caught his eye, smiled in a quick, fitful way and, leaving her group abruptly, came toward him with outstretched hand. Peter started to meet her: she was Cécile Kirov, Chabrier's friend, whom he had met at the café nights in Paris.

"Mademoiselle!" he cried. "What a happy surprise to find you here!"

"Let me sit with you a while," she said in English with her droll Russian accent. "They are having a wild discussion over there, and I need a little rest. Oh, but pardon me—you have a friend. Ah, it's Mr. Woodfin! How-do-you-do?"

"You know each other?" asked Peter, astonished, although, since his establishment in Munich, he had found some surprise every day.

"Who doesn't know Cécile Kirov?" said Jack Woodfin in his brusque, hearty way. "She's the best sculptress we have in Munich. You're behind times, Peter!"

Cécile Kirov laughed her low, rippling laugh as she sat down at the little round table with them and lit her cigarette.

"Did you go to Munich directly from Paris?" she asked. Though her native tongue was Russian, as

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Peter remembered from what Chabrier had told him, she had spoken English, French and German from her childhood.

"No, I've been at home two years," said Peter. "But Mr. Woodfin prescribed Munich for my art."

"Loring was a fashionable portrait painter," explained Jack Woodfin, "and had more orders to paint inane society women than he could fill."

"Whoo!" Cécile made a wistful outcry of admiration. "More orders than you could fill! And were the women so very dull that you came here?"

"My paintings were dull," said Peter. "That's why I came here."

"I understand," said Cécile. "You could not paint dull pictures here. There is no dullness in Munich; it is a very gay and happy life."

How quickly this stranger understood what only a few chosen spirits could grasp at home, what his father and mother did not understand to this day!

"It is indeed," cried Peter in his new enthusiasm. "Munich is a paradise for painters!"

"Not quite a paradise," said Cécile with a tired smile. "There are not enough fruit trees in it."

She looked at Peter with her large light gray eyes that were odd and appealing under the jet-black brows.

"You must come to my studio," she exclaimed impulsively. "I have a nice mountain boy that I want you to see. You too, Mr. Woodfin."

"You haven't been at my studio now for over a month," said Jack. "I'm offended."

"Hard work, hard work!" replied Cécile. "Hard work all day, and festivities all night. But I will come."

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And to yours, too, Mr. Loring, if you want me to see your pictures."

"Do, do!" cried Peter. "I have only sketches as yet, but I'd like to have your opinion."

"By the way, Loring," said Jack. "I have a first-class model for you: a perfect Carmen, quite young—a real gypsy. Black hair, nut-brown skin, eyes like coals, and she wears a jolly gypsy dress for me, green and scarlet, half in rags."

"Oh, is she something for me, too?" asked Cécile eagerly.

"No, nothing for a sculptor," Jack Woodfin replied. "All color—but you could make something out of her, Loring."

"Oh, I envy you painters!" sighed Cécile. "A scarlet ribbon, a sunbeam in a window are subjects enough for you. But we sculptors must have such solid things . . . You'll like my little highland boy," she said, turning her clear gray eyes on Peter. "He has more life than my others. But I am going to see your work first . . . perhaps you are too great now anyway to look at mine."

"Nonsense!" replied Peter. "Come tomorrow. I'm next door to Woodfin."

"Too much work!" she said. "Let's say the day after tomorrow."

"Very well," answered Peter. "But in the morning—then you can have the best light on my pictures."

"Au revoir!" Cécile gave each her hand abruptly and slipped back to the group of men in the corner, who were now eyeing Jack and Peter.

The two friends left the café and started to walk

home by a roundabout route. The streets were quiet and the bright half-moon made the smooth pavement gleam silvery white like ice.

"Let's walk along the street to the Maximilian bridge," said Jack. "It's too good a night to go indoors."

Though he lived in the city, Jack Woodfin, as the true son of his father, was a great lover of nature and had shown Peter all the charming walks in the surrounding country. Now they were marching together in silence.

"Do you know Cécile well?" Peter began slowly.

"I see her now and then," Jack answered. "But you know, since my affair with Minna, I've kept away from women as well as I could."

Peter knew through gossip, though Jack had never alluded to it before, that his colleague had lived for a year or so in the fashion of Bohème, with a young artist named Minna who had one day vanished miraculously and left Jack embittered against all womankind.

"Cécile's a very good sort," Jack continued. "Works like a slave. She's a poor little devil, and lives from feast to famine. Her work is mighty respectable, too. But she isn't the vogue. There was quite a number of her things in the last sculpture exhibit and she won a prize, I believe, but hasn't sold a thing."

That accounted for the wistful note in Cécile's voice, and the tired droop of her mouth!

"She looks worn out," remarked Peter aloud.

"It isn't only worry about her daily bread that makes her look like that," said Jack Woodfin slowly.

Peter's curiosity was alert.

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"What else is it then?" he asked with more eagerness than he intended.

"Why, last winter," Jack replied, "she was living with a Russian fellow—a sculptor too . . ."

"Oh, I remember now," cried Peter. "A Russian sculptor was with her when I met her through Chabrier in Paris—a great big swaggering fellow he was, with a coarse black moustache——"

"Oh, that's he," said Jack. "And last May, I guess, they quarreled, and all at once he was gone, and she was left a wreck."

They had reached the Maximilian bridge and stood still to look across the river at the Maximilianeum, the great military school that loomed up in the enhancing moonlight like a romantic castle among the trees on the steep embankment. The river Isar was roaring beneath them, and though the moon gave it a ghostly silver gleam, Peter knew that by day it was a cool, light green, and he felt the soothing freshness of the color that he could not see.

The beauty before them made both silent and meditative, and Peter sighed from a sorrow that was not his own. Poor Cécile! There was nothing more to ask about her, there was nothing more to say, but he could not forget the plaintive appeal in her eyes. So he and Jack walked in a silence only broken, now and then, by a stray idle remark, till Peter left his companion and climbed up the three steep flights of stairs to his studio. In the dark he felt for his candle and matches, and overcome by drowsiness, went quickly to bed and fell into a dreamless sleep.

The next morning he went directly to Jack Woodfin's

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studio to look at the gypsy model. Peter had to knock three times before Jack answered, and then only with a grunt, for he was deep in work. The model was indeed a treasure for a painter—a wild brown creature, of surely no more than sixteen years, with straggly, coarse black hair falling over her bare brown shoulder and her scarlet rags. When she should be his own model, however, Peter would not have her lie on a rug, as if she were sunning herself on a heath which Jack actually painted on his canvas—no, Peter would have her dance and fling up her thin brown arms with a tambourine in one hand. He must have her tomorrow! Jack's picture, though, was excellent.

"You're a wizard!" exclaimed Peter, as he sat down on a box covered with a rug and watched his colleague paint. "You've conjured up a true hot August day with a gypsy lying by the roadside!"

"I'm just putting on the finishing strokes," said Jack. "Take a cigarette—on that table behind the Athene—yes, those!—then I'll engage her for you."

"I want her tomorrow," said Peter.

"She's much in demand," Jack replied. "But we'll see. Fortunately the child's a dunce; so you're not tempted to flirt with her. The spell's broken when she opens her mouth. That's a very good thing—you're not distracted, and you can work away at a fine rate."

All these remarks could be made safely in English, while the innocent gypsy stared into the void. Peter lit his cigarette and planned his own painting in brilliant details. His morning visits to Jack Woodfin were not infrequent, for Jack's studio had acquired the genuine studio air which Peter's, as that of a newcomer,

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could not yet boast. For here there were old dusty draperies, ecclesiastical relics—rosaries, icons, ivory Madonnas—mixed with inspired disorder among Tanager figures, stuffed owls and parrots, fantastic candlesticks, cigarettes, oranges and apples. Peter lingered till Jack's painting was finished and the model secured for the next day. Then he looked at his friend's work with a critical eye, gave him some frank opinions and, with lively talking and smoking, the morning was gone. Peter was not niggardly with his time nowadays, as he had been the last winter at home, for studio talks or long tramps in the country with a colleague now seemed to him as good preparations for work as the painting of studies and sketches. For his pastimes here in Munich were not distractions from his art: on the contrary, art was their starting-point, and they led back to art.

But the next day, when Peter had the bright gypsy model in his own bare studio, he plunged into work. She had brought her tambourine and posed with one bare brown foot stepping forward as in a dance, her arms flung up in gypsy abandon. The scarlet of her ragged dress, the black of her hair and the copper shade of her skin made Peter work in a fever. Till now he had made only sketches since he had settled in Munich; this should be his first large picture.

Even after the model had left, he worked on from memory, and early the next morning he was drawn to his new canvas. Greedily he used every moment of the short period in which the gypsy could hold her hard pose of gaiety and caprice; silently he worked, forgetting that his model breathed and had a human tongue

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and was something beside brilliant colors and wild, rhythmic lines. He worked in a frenzy . . .

A knock! Cursed he who disturbed him in this precious half-hour before the model left! The janitor's stout, florid wife popped in her disheveled head and announced a lady who did not give her name. Peter beat his forehead: how could he forget Cécile in his infatuation with his work? He told the janitor's wife to send the lady up, dismissed the model half an hour early, to the young creature's joy, and began to walk downstairs to meet Cécile.

"Confess you had forgotten I was coming," she greeted him, but Peter would not confess.

"I am happy you have come," he said truthfully. "I wish I had more of a studio to show you!"

"Oh!" she uttered with a quick shrug of her shoulders, as she looked round frankly. "Yours is a palace to mine! I have no sketches for my wall, you know—that always makes your painters' rooms so bright and jolly. I have only gray figures standing about, and the smell of wet clay all night. Oh, what are you doing there?" she cried, as her eye fell on the fresh canvas. "Is that Woodfin's model?"

"Oh, it's only begun," cried Peter. "You mustn't look at it yet. I want it to be my chef-d'œuvre."

Frankly he had told her in the first ten minutes the ambition that was just now burning most ardently in his heart; frankly he had spoken out his ideas ever since he had come to Munich: for everything here among the artists was done frankly without fear of the neighbor's opinion.

"Then you must send it to the winter exhibition,"

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exclaimed Cécile with enthusiasm. "You and Woodfin both—and see who wins—or perhaps both will get in. I like your sketches!"

She walked along the walls, looking with sharp eyes at the sketches and making comments here and there, then threw herself, suddenly relaxed, into the one arm-chair of Peter's studio.

"I'm tired," she said, opening wide her appealing gray eyes.

In this moment Peter recalled how one day at home, soon after his return from Paris, Mrs. Montague's face had interested him because of its resemblance to Cécile's. How strange that seemed to him now! Surely, there was no visible resemblance; but perhaps the hidden bitterness that made one guess and wonder was the same in both. No—Cécile's bitterness was not hidden like Mrs. Montague's, behind cool, green glances and ironic smiles; her sorrow was frank, like all things in this new sphere.

"You're working too hard," said Peter.

"I know it," Cécile replied, lighting a cigarette complacently. "But I'm happy only when I work myself to death."

"You won't be, though, when you break down," said Peter wisely.

Cécile laughed her low melodious laugh.

"I have broken down many times," she said. "But what does that matter? It only mattered once, though, and that was last summer, when I went home for rest. And, I tell you, better hard work in a hole of a studio than life in a bourgeois town after you have known Bohème!"

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Peter wondered if his experience would be the same on his return home.

"Why?" he asked blandly.

"I had two months of Philistine life at my brother's house in a small Russian town. My brother's wife asked me why I modeled—if the clay did not feel moist and unpleasant in my hand. . . . My brother's wife gave coffee parties in the afternoon and the good ladies told how Mrs. A's cook had gone away after she had received such a good woolen blouse for Christmas, and Mrs. B's baby had the whooping cough, and Mrs. C had not invited Mrs. D to her sewing circle, until I wished Mrs. A, B, C and D, all the way through the alphabet, at the bottom of the sea and myself too . . . Well, I'm back in my Munich, and needn't complain."

"Are you the only artist in your family?" asked Peter, aware of a great curiosity about this frail, wistful sculptor who was reclining at ease in his armchair, dressed in simple gray with only a fresh crimson rose at her belt for ornament.

"My mother was a sculptor, a French woman—Renée Laroche—perhaps you've heard of her? No? My father met her when he was studying medicine in the Sorbonne. She died young—of too much Philistine existence, I suppose . . . but you don't want to hear my life history! That's the beauty of our artist life here, that nobody asks about the other man's past, don't you think so, Mr. Loring? What we can do counts—nothing else."

"And what we are," said Peter.

Cécile shrugged her shoulders.

"What are we artists but what we can do?" she said,

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fixing her lucid gray eyes on his. "If I am not my sculpture, I am nothing, I'm not worth living."

"You are a true artist!" cried Peter in honest admiration. "I wish I had known you long ago!"

Cécile laughed in her low, rippling way.

"There's still time to become good friends," she said.

"Oh, we must!" cried Peter. "We must have rendezvous at our little café—you and Woodfin and I, and then——"

"Are you going to the artists' fête tomorrow night in the Loewenhaus?" she interrupted him.

Peter shook his head.

"You ought to come!" she said. "I will tell them to send you a ticket. All your friends will be there. These balls are merry—they make you forget your sorrows—or perhaps you have no sorrows?"

Peter thought of the Russian sculptor with whom he had seen Cécile in Paris and of what Jack Woodfin had told him the other night; then, all at once, he felt like a schoolboy before this pale, ardent woman who could not be more than his own age and had already drunk deeply from the bitter cup of grief.

"I have none at all in Munich," he replied. "And I'll come to the fête and we'll laugh and dance all night!"

"Bravo!" cried Cécile, clapping her hands. "Tomorrow night then! Good-by!"

She had risen quickly and shook hands with him at the door in the cordial manner of a comrade.

He started to accompany her down the stairs, but she flew down like a pursued bird.

"Don't!" she cried. "No escorting, please, and such nonsense! We are colleagues!"

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And in a twinkling she was out of sight.

The postman instead was looking up at him from the foot of the stairs.

"A letter for you!" he cried, and Peter came down to get it.

A letter from Virginia—the second, since he had left home. This was only a short one, however. Oh, what startling news!

You will be surprised to hear [she wrote] that soon we are not going to be so very far apart any more, quite near neighbors, in fact—comparatively. Mother has been ordered to go to Bozen, and that is not so very far from Munich, you know.

What joyful news! Peter threw himself into his arm-chair and mused, with the letter spread out on his knee. What joyful news! And yet, somehow, he could not find quite the joy that he would expect at such news! How strange that was . . . how queer . . . how hard to understand. . . .

CHAPTER XI

BOHÈME

TWENTY candles were burning at midnight in Peter's and Cécile's common studio, for it was a gala night, and red wine was gleaming in the glasses, and Cécile wore her white gown of fête and her earrings, and all the ladies were sparkling and lighthearted, and a blond fellow was tuning his flute. For Jack's painting and Peter's—the "Gypsy in the Sun" and the "Dancing Gypsy"—had both been accepted for the Winter Exhibition, and tonight was the celebration.

"Walters, play a very tearful melody!" cried Hartung, the most jovial of Peter's colleagues, to the young man with the flute. "That will make us all the gayer."

And the tall blond youth played a lachrymose air, while the revelers, grouped on the divan, chairs and boxes, hushed their jesting and merriment and listened languidly with gleaming eyes and laughter still lingering on their lips. Peter looked about in happy bewilderment: all these brilliant and jolly people were rejoicing because of his success in the gayest, heartiest good-fellowship. Envious tongues were wagging outside, but in this small, candle-lit studio all were friends, and he and Jack, strangers from a foreign land, were the heroes of their fête.

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The flute ceased languidly like a wind dying down.

"Oh, more, more!" cried Vira, the cousin of Cécile, who, dressed in sumptuous purple velvet like a peacock among her simpler colleagues, was reclining on the divan beside Jack. "Go on, I was just having an inspiration!"

Then there was a great burst of laughter, for Vira, Russian and dark like Cécile, but of a more imposing and less delicate beauty, was the only drone among these bees, who with much buzzing was always announcing an inspiration, but who never had, like the others, any harvest of golden honey to show.

"Perhaps another inspiration will come if our Lieutenant will strike up a waltz!" cried a majestic middle-aged woman with a profusion of yellow forelocks, who was nicknamed the "Dowager Empress" and was the best miniature painter in the city. "Walter's flute was exquisite, but I, for one, think it is time to dance."

The Lieutenant was Hartung, who was so called because he had been an army officer until he had exchanged the sword for the paint-brush. His eyes were bright blue and always sparkling as if a joke were lurking in their depths; his hair was thick and blond, but with a strange bald place that was said to come from a scar on his forehead received in a duel.

"His hair fell out,
In a single bout"

Peter whispered to Jack in English, then he walked up to the piano—a piano that belonged to a music student who allowed Peter the use of it in return for the priv-

ilege of practicing in the studio—and slapped Hartung on the shoulder heartily:

“Now play with dash, my boy!” he cried. “We must have a night of it!”

Chairs and boxes were swiftly pushed to the wall, the big easel was shoved away into a safe corner.

“Remember that we are celebrating ‘The Dancing Gypsy,’” Cécile said to Peter, laughing mischievously. The pathetic, hungry look had fled from her eyes since she and Peter had set up their studio-household together, and she was making merry with the merry-makers, dancing with almost a wild abandon, as if she were flinging away her griefs and cares. The studio was a narrow ballroom, but as there were only six ladies at this revel, they had space enough for their gaiety.

“With Hartung playing, we could dance in a prison cell, couldn’t we, love?” said Peter, during a dance, to Cécile.

The music stopped, and they rested on the divan.

“Cécile won’t let me paint her,” said Peter to Jack who stood watching them.

Cécile laughed her rippling, melodious laugh.

“No,” she said. “I have my work to do, my friend! What do you suppose? Do you think I can idle away my mornings?”

“I’m tired of professional models,” Peter complained. “I can’t look at another of their stupid faces.”

“Take Heller!” suggested Cécile, with a nod toward a sculptor standing by the piano, who with his odd, weatherbeaten face, shaggy hair, part blond and part gray, and small, keen blue eyes made a good subject indeed.

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"That's an idea!" cried Peter. "Will he submit, do you suppose?"

Cécile called Heller and Peter made his request.

"Cécile refused," said Peter. "And you are the next best subject in Munich."

Heller shook his Pan-like head.

"My Bacchante comes before you!" he said with a jovial grin.

"But when your Bacchante is done," pleaded Cécile.

"She will never be done," said the sculptor.

"I have an idea!" cried Peter. "Let me paint you while you're working on your Bacchante—I won't disturb you a bit—I'll paint quietly in a corner of your studio. Oh, it shall be the most inspired picture I have ever done: 'The Sculptor and His Work.'⁴ The Bacchante shall be as conspicuous as her maker. Will that win you over?"

The Bacchante, on which he had been working for months, was dear to Heller like a child and when anyone spoke of her his eyes beamed with a paternal light.

"You can't resist that now!" teased Cécile.

"If you are so eager to help immortalize my Bacchante," Heller yielded. "Why—come to my room tomorrow, and we'll talk it over."

"Bravo!" cried Cécile. "What a picture that will make!"

Just then Hartung struck up a jovial tune, and Peter spun round with Cécile dizzily, while his mind was afire with the idea of his new work.

Dancing, laughter, red wine, dripping candles, a room that spun round, eyes with veils of drowsiness drawn

over the gleams of merriment—all this Peter saw as in a happy trance, till the city hall clock struck four.

"My model is coming at ten!" whispered Cécile. "Good-by, sleep!"

"'What has night to do with sleep?'" quoted Peter drowsily, when after breezy farewells the revelers had left them alone.

Peter slept till noon and woke up shocked to find that Cécile had begun work at ten while he had been deep in dreams. After hurriedly eating the breakfast that Cécile cooked for him on their little oil stove during a pause in her work, he went straight to Heller's studio. As Peter opened the door, he found the sculptor bending over his beloved work, with an ardent glow on his faun's face. When he heard Peter, he turned his head round, still keeping his hands on the clay figure, and laughed merrily.

"Stay!" cried Peter. "Don't stir!"

He snatched a small block of drawing paper and a pencil out of his pocket, and with feverish strokes made a rough sketch of the jovial sculptor with his wild dancing Bacchante.

"Now!" cried Peter, with a sigh of relief, "you can move again. I have caught you. Now I know what I want my big picture to be. I must catch that one moment again in colors, and I will if it takes me months!"

So Peter found his new task and, buoyed up by the success of his "Dancing Gypsy" and the generous interest of Cécile and Jack and his odd, shaggy model himself, he worked with daily growing zest.

"Tell me what you think of my 'Heller with Bac-

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chante'?" said Peter to Jack one night when they were alone together in their favorite smoky café.

"Why, you've got first-rate technique," Jack answered. "A lot of dash—all your things are mighty clever!"

Clever—technique! Those two words Peter kept hearing as his colleagues commented on his studies and even on his finished "Dancing Gypsy." At the bottom of his heart he wished that the words "brilliant" and "art" might take the place of the refrain "clever—technique," but this wish he smothered in silence, for, after all, to have a picture exhibited so soon in Munich gave him no little satisfaction. Critics, to be sure, had not all been favorable; some had called his work shallow, and one had even dared to libel it "cheap"; but Peter's spirits were high and could not be subdued by the wagging of sharp tongues.

"Look at our countryman over there!" said Jack suddenly. "How bored he looks! Doesn't he seem out of place?"

"Where?" asked Peter and turned in the direction that Jack indicated with a nod of his head.

"Why!" Peter exclaimed. "If that isn't Harold!"

"What Harold?" said Jack.

"Don't you know Harold Montague?" returned Peter. "Mrs. Montague's son—from our own Gullport?"

"I'm a stranger in my own home town, you must remember!" said Jack.

But Peter darted to the table where Harold sat smoking alone and obviously bored.

"Hallo, Harold!" Peter roused him out of his reveries.

"Why, Peter!" cried Harold. "This is jolly! How are you?"

"I'm more than happy," said Peter. "And you? What brings you to Munich?"

"I'm going round the world. My mother thought I needed to broaden my education—law is too narrow-ing!" Harold said with a sarcastic smile. "And to say the truth, I was a little bored at home. So I'm wending my way round the world."

Peter introduced Harold and Jack and all three sat down and smoked together.

"I came in here," said Harold, "because I was told I might see genuine artist life in this place, and what do I find but two men from Gullport, Mass.?"

"You can't come from the outside and look in on Bohemian life, you know," said Jack. "You've got to be in it, else you don't know anything about it."

"But it seems to me," exclaimed Harold, "that all Munich is of the artists, for the artists, by the artists."

"That's true," said Peter. "Why isn't it that way anywhere at home?"

"How can it be?" said Harold. "The people don't take art seriously—except immigrant Italians."

"No, over there it is nothing more than a decoration of rich houses," said Jack.

"You're right," Harold responded. "Take my mother, now—her house is supposed to be a stronghold of art. Well, I dare say some of her artistic friends—you know I never mixed much with them, Peter!—well, I dare say some of them do care about art and are connoisseurs, but they are connoisseurs of cock-tails too, and care about them very decidedly. Art isn't

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a serious matter to them—you can't deny it. I confess, I never thought of this before, until I came here to Munich three days ago and talked with an art student on the train. All in all, Peter, though I believe your things were all the rage at home, I don't blame you for preferring Munich."

Peter thought of Harold's mother and laughed in his heart.

"I told Peter it was the only place for him," said Jack. "And he wouldn't believe me at first. It struck me that he might as well be a sailor in the Alps as a painter at home. But at last he saw it himself."

"Perhaps some day," said Harold, "we'll have our great American art. We're not such rank materialists. Think of our libraries and the respect we have for books."

"Oh yes," said Peter. "But that's different. Now my father lives and breathes among books, but I know a painting—though he doesn't say so—is something queer and frivolous to him. Why, our Pilgrim fathers read books—but did they endure the sight of a picture?"

"You're right," said Harold. "Well, we'll have to wait for the great American artist to inspire the people. Dear me, what serious conversation! I believe I haven't had a talk with you, Peter, since my college days! Tell me about your good times!"

Till midnight the three lingered in the smoky room and when they parted on the street, Harold said:

"I wish I were an artist of Bohemia and could have all your jolly wild times. But tomorrow I'm off for Vienna—worse luck! Friends of the Mater asked me

to stay with them, awfully stiff, stupid people. Then I go on to Greece. Well, it was good to see you both."

"Good-by!" said Peter. "Who knows where we will meet again!"

And Peter walked home, rejoicing that he did not have to visit dull friends of Mrs. Montague's in Vienna, and that he had his hard, absorbing work.

But he did not work too hard. For snowflakes were dancing in the air and the Christmas spirit was hovering over Munich. Peter had never seen such festiveness: forests of Christmas trees sprang up on the city squares over night and filled the air with the scent of hemlock; booths with toylined streets that had been sober before; and at every corner gilt pine-cones, icicles, candles and a profusion of silver angels' hair were offered to the passer-by with lusty cries. Mistletoe and branches of evergreens seemed to have been strewn over the city, as if for angels to walk on. This beckoning of joy from every street corner Peter could not and did not want to resist. So on sunny afternoons, when snow was crackling underfoot, he would ride out into the country with Cécile and Jack for jovial hours on snowshoes or skees; or they would go skating on the pond in the English Garden. Cécile always had to be roused from her work. Pale with dark circles under her eyes, but with iron persistence in her frail, modeling hands, she never seemed to tire of her tasks, while her cousin Vira would often come and lounge beside her in a fantastic robe, smoking and making remarks on Cécile's work.

"Or if you're too tired," Peter said on one of these

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invasions of her peace, "let us just meander through the streets and look at the shops and booths."

"What a Philistine amusement!" exclaimed Vira, who was sitting at the window, draped in a flowing gown of orange silk with a paper-covered French novel in her lap. "In this Christmas season I keep out of the streets. I find that my subtlest ideas are rubbed off by the elbowing crowd."

Vira, called the "pseudo-Bohemian" by Peter's colleagues, had a luxurious studio on the ground floor of the same house in which Peter's and Cécile's was at the top, and spent her days conversing and imbibing atmosphere.

"When I stop work, I have no more subtle ideas," said Cécile, laying down her clay. "And Peter and I wouldn't turn Philistine, even if we went to market and brought home potatoes."

Peter was not a little flattered that in spite of his New England breeding, he should be considered a genuine member of the esoteric Bohemian circle into which, thanks to Jack Woodfin, he had slipped in a few months. As he sauntered through the festive, buzzing streets and the fragrant green squares with Cécile, it seemed to him as if he had not really lived before he came to Munich.

"A new kind of candle holder!" cried a peddler at Cécile. "No danger of fire. Take it for your Christmas tree, Madame!"

"Vira is going to St. Moritz for the holidays," said Cécile. "We shall be alone on Christmas Eve. The Dowager Empress, good soul, will want to see our tree, and we want Jack too."

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They bought a little Christmas tree and silver threads and glittering chains and balls and candles to light on Christmas Eve, besides the cakes and fruits and nuts for the feast. All thoughts of the homesickness at Christmas time that he had secretly feared fled in the festive turmoil, and he realized to his astonishment that he had not looked forward so eagerly to the holidays since he was a child. There was joy everywhere, and nothing in Peter's life to throw a shadow on it; for he had joy in his work, joy in the merry life about him, joy in his colleagues and in Cécile who was walking gaily at his side with her arms full of glittering toys.

"I want to decorate the tree alone, though," she said. "I want to surprise you and Jack, just as if you were children."

Like a child, Peter looked forward to Christmas Eve, and when, on the twenty-fourth of December, dusk began to sink into darkness and bells to toll, Peter laid down his palette and opened his windows to let the carols float in. From his high studio he could look far over the city with its snow-covered roofs, glistening in the veiled moonlight, and the shadowy towers and steeples looming into the star-sprinkled sky. At home, Christmas had hovered round the fireside, had lurked in the corners of his father's house—here the whole city was his house in holiday adornment, here every golden window shining in the dark was lit for him, and to greet him the bells were ringing their chimes. But, after all, Peter did not have to throw himself into the welcoming arms of the big city, for now he had a home within his own four walls.

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"Merry Christmas!" Cécile called in her melodious voice as she ran into the studio, her arms filled with fragrant branches; and Peter kissed her happily.

"Still working!" she said reproachfully. "Hurry and put on your holiday clothes. And you mustn't look behind there," she said pointing at a screen that stood hiding one corner of the room. "That's a surprise!"

Half an hour later, the Dowager Empress or Mrs. Kroll arrived with a breezy air of festivity. A widow for ten years with a solid, bourgeois past, she always radiated matronly benevolence.

"Let me help you light the tree, daughter," she said to Cécile glancing at the screen. "That's what I like to do best of anything in the world."

"A Merry Christmas, friends!" Jack Woodfin's gruff voice sounded from the stairs—a voice so like his father's that all at once there came to Peter's mind a Christmas long ago, when he was a little boy and Jack's father had come to him as Santa Claus.

The Dowager Empress came out from behind the screen and sat down at the piano. She had a silvery, clear high voice, and to a gentle accompaniment, sang the song that was being sung in hundreds of houses in Munich in this very same moment:

"Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht—"

Meanwhile Cécile drew aside the screen, and the little Christmas tree, abloom with many golden candle-flowers, glistened in its tangled cobweb of silver threads. The song and the sheen of the tree mingled with the fragrance of the hemlock branches and brought a glow

of joy to Cécile's pallid cheek and a sense of faultless harmony to Peter's heart. Here he was in a foreign land, far away from his home, and yet he felt as if he were in this very moment in the bosom of a family. It was not blood, but art, that held this family together, and this tie was strong and dear.

When the last note of the last song had died down and the last candle had been blown out, Cécile and Mrs. Kroll spread out the feast that had been mysteriously prepared, and from his height of silent ecstasy Peter stepped down to earthly merry-making, yet always subdued by a reverend sense of mystery, as if angels' wings were rustling against the window-panes.

"If our fathers could see us here—!" said Peter under his breath to Jack.

"They would pity us poor devils," Jack replied. "Especially yours would—and they couldn't guess that we're ten times happier than mine in his hermitage and yours in his snug home."

"Who is happier than who?" asked Cécile, flitting by with a great copper bowl full of nuts.

"We are happier than our fathers," said Peter. "And I'm happier tonight than anyone else in all Munich. Are you?"

"Yes," said Cécile.

She glanced at the Christmas tree, and as if her eyes reflected its silver glistening, they were illumined with a serene joy.

"How beautiful it is, how restful!" said Cécile. "If one could always have Christmas music and candle-light and peace! But on New Year's Eve—so soon!—they will make a wild night of it again, and we will have to

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be with them, of course. Then our lovely peace will be blown away. So soon!"

She sighed lightly, but Peter laid his hand on her arm.

"Even though we should be wild again," he said, "we shall never forget this peaceful night."

The next morning when Peter opened the Christmas mail from his home, it seemed as if the jolly postman with the icicles in his beard had brought it from some remote stellar sphere. The letter from Virginia, too, though it was written from Bozen, seemed an echo from voices heard years ago.

"I hope you aren't very lonely at holiday time," Virginia had written, like Peter's mother. Lonely! Never before had he felt so little lonely, because so little misunderstood. How could he, indeed, he misunderstood on this island where all who understood one another were severed from the cold, indifferent world!

The holidays passed swiftly in the solemnly adorned churches, on the streets beneath festively illumined windows, in the country on the glistening white roads by frozen ponds and pine groves decked with snow.

And the eve of the old year sank down on twenty hilarious artists in a separate room of the café where they were wont to celebrate, among them Cécile in a spangled gown with shining eyes and a feverish glow on her cheeks, Peter at her side, Peter shouting and singing more boisterously than the rest. They were all sitting about a big round table in a cloud of smoke, and the fiery liquid from the punch bowl in the middle flowed freely and kindled flames in forty eyes.

"It is time to think of our sins," shrilly cried Vira,

who was gorgeous in a scarlet robe cut perilously low in the back, and long earrings of gold filigree that gave her the look of an Egyptian dancer. "I wonder who has the most?"

"I! I!" shouted the revelers, and Peter shouted with them.

"Well, Peter," exclaimed the Dowager Empress, "why are you shouting too? You are the only white one among all these black sheep. You haven't any sins!"

"Oh, there's still time!" said Vira to console him, and Peter silently emptied his glass, piqued by his reputation.

The musicians outside of the esoteric room were playing waltzes with a demoniac swiftness. Heller, with a bacchanalian look in the small eyes that twinkled out of his faun's face, rose and began to reel round the table in ragged dance rhythm.

"Hallo, Heller!" said Jack. "How can you dance when your Bacchante is at home?"

"Oh, my dear, sweet Bacchante!" wailed Heller, embracing and kissing the air, as if he were holding his precious statue in his arms.

The whole company burst out into gleeful laughter, rose as of one accord, and turned its feasting into dancing. The door was opened, so that the neighboring music could flood the room, the rhythm of the waltzes grew swifter and madder, the dancers whirled and reeled, and those that were not dancing, silently emptied the punch bowl.

All at once the music stopped and a solemnity checked the dancing and laughing, for the city hall clock

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was striking twelve. The windows were opened to let in festive sounds—the tolling of many bells, the screaming of whistles and flourish of horns.

Peter and Cécile touched glasses gravely as if they were performing a solemn rite, and Peter looked into her big, wistful eyes.

“What will the new year bring you and me?” he asked in a voice of awe, touched, as he was, by a mysterious sense that the bells were tolling his fate, which could not stay happy always.

The old hungry, haunting look came into Cécile’s eyes as she shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. And Peter felt that the New Year held in store for him something dark, uprooting, baneful, and he gazed at Cécile with strange foreboding.

CHAPTER XII

THE VISION GROWS TAINTED

THE Carnival ball! Peter stood at the door to watch and breathe a moment before plunging into the whirlpool. The gaudy dancers swept by him, uncanny with their masked faces, like shadows in bright attire reeling through a dream. Here was a Carmen with a rose at her ear; there a Black Forest peasant girl; a gypsy in gaudy rags; a spangled Turk, a glittering fairy.

A Scotch highlander whirled past him so near that he brushed against Peter's shoulder, and Peter knew by the costume that it was Jack. In his arms danced a frail sinuous apparition in a shimmering garment, silvery like the scales of a mermaid. Her shoulders and languid arms were bare and dazzling like white sand lapped by glistening waves, her black hair was twisted in a coil. He knew the curve of her neck, the droop of her shoulders, the languorous lines of her arms. She turned—her luminous eyes were shining like gems in the black setting of her mask. It was Cécile.

A pang of remorse made Peter linger alone in the midst of the wild Carnival ball. Cécile! Though he dared on this maddest of nights to snatch any of the glittering dancers out of the arms of their cavaliers

without ceremony, like a tiger snatching his prey, he dared not come near Cécile. It was all over between her and Peter since one ugly day when poor Cécile, deadly pale with bloodless lips, had discovered his faithlessness, and an hour later had taken flight to Vira's cold establishment from their own cheerful studio home. All over!

It was that model Fedora who had begun it all, who, while Cécile had been away at the Zoo modeling a lion, had posed for him day after day, laughing her sly demoniac laugh in front of a mirror, with a spangled scarf thrown over her bare white shoulders and her strange copper-golden hair sliding down to her neck. Fedora had begun it with her diabolical laugh, and then, when he had lost Cécile. . . . As the gaudy dancers spun by him, so the train of Peter's mates in sin were reeling past his mind, stretching out their languishing arms to him, flashing passionate glances, grinning with evil distorted lips. What was the value of this vile, glittering train when Cécile was lost—Cécile, the best woman in Munich—Cécile who would not even look his way while she was dancing with the compassionate Jack in her mad, furious dance of despair!

Like a flame suddenly shooting up in the night, which lights a part of the landscape with uncanny clearness and leaves the rest in darkness, so the last bitter scene with Cécile was gruesomely present and distinct in Peter's mind. Cécile had been called to Russia to attend the marriage of a brother and had returned sooner than he had expected. It was at six o'clock in the morning that she had waited for him after a whole

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night's vigil, white and feverish with long-suppressed rage.

"With whom have you been?" she had gasped, with no other greeting.

There had been something commanding, something like steel in the light of her eyes that forbade untruths. So, though he had felt with horrible foreboding that he was risking the loss of his dearest friend, he had answered sullenly:

"With Fedora."

"That painted devil!" Cécile had shrieked. "That scum——"

Then she had bitten her lip and frowned sternly and had walked into the other room, where she began to pack her trunk in feverish haste. He had tried to keep her back with vows that his real love belonged to her, with reminders of their happy months together, with entreaties and promises—but in vain.

"I felt it coming before I went away," she had said shuddering. "Ever since that day I came home from the Zoo . . . I'm glad I went away now—it has made everything clear between us."

He had tried to take her hand, but she had drawn hers away, shrinking from his touch . . . How clearly he saw it all again: her deathly face, her twitching arm, the packed trunk that had made this nightmare so real . . . how present that gloomy scene was here in the thick of romping and revelry!

Remorse choked him; but it was too late! If he had lost Cécile and with her peace and a tranquil mind for work, he would plunge headlong over the downward path, for every new wild adventure left a brilliant vigor-

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ous reflection on his canvas. If passion inflamed his art—why then on, on into the flames!

A luxurious creature in a fantastic Persian or Turkish costume happened to catch his eye because of the broad scarlet sash round her waist, perhaps, or because she was dancing with savage abandon.

Like a tiger Peter snatched the sumptuous Persian and whirled away with her.

"Who are you?" asked Peter in the heat of the dance.

"Call me what you will," answered his partner in a rich, seductive voice. "Cleopatra—Kundri—Undine—Circe—call me Eve, call me Salome——"

"Salome—that's what you are!" exclaimed Peter. "The arch-temptress!"

Salome rested her head listlessly on Peter's shoulder, and he kissed her white neck.

"I am afraid of you, you wild matador!" cried the temptress and laughed gaily.

When they stopped a moment in the whirl to breathe, a little Japanese doll of a lady came tripping up to Peter.

"Why don't you dance with me?" she chirped.

"Why, I will with joy!" said Peter. "Come, Madame Chrysanthèm . . . The next one-step with you, Salome!" he called back to his first partner, as he danced off with the little Japanese.

"You won't find me when you want me!" Salome flung after him sharply. "I won't dance to your tune!"

Peter heard her clanging laughter above the air of the waltz, but a minute later she was pirouetting near him with a sprightly Pierrot.

The bird-like Japanese bored Peter, so, when the

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music paused, he dropped her into the arms of a Spanish knight and rushed off in pursuit of a fluttering deep blue veil that had beguiled his eye. The owner of the blue veil was snatched from him after a few swift rounds when the fiery, diabolical waltz was at its height. So Peter, greedy for every moment of revelry, hunted his glittering wild game, plunging from one dancer to another, on—on—deliriously, drunkenly, savagely. . . .

One, two, three—tra, la, la . . . If life were a waltz, what horror if the music should stop! Death and ashes without madcap rhythm and dance! One must dance on forever to flee death

In the midst of this frenzy, he noticed one guest at the ball who did not dance with his partner and Peter wondered who this odd stranger might be. Madman! Aloof and serene, in a noble Greek robe, he was walking up and down as if he were watching children at play. Plato that was—in every gesture the calm and haughty man of thought. Who could the masked lady be that was walking up and down at Plato's side, in the garb of a Greek maiden with a gold fillet in her dark hair and a wreath round her waist? Poor soul, poor love of Plato, doomed to walk in meditation when Carnival was raging round about!

"The next dance is the midnight dance!" whispered Salome who was in Peter's arms again.

"Then I can kiss you on your lips when that ugly mask drops off," said Peter.

"No, to punish you I sha'n't dance the midnight dance with you," she said in her rich voice. "You left me for that Japanese!"

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The music stopped and Salome fled out of Peter's reach.

Annoyed, Peter looked about in search of a worthy partner for the riotous dance at the end of which all masks would drop at the stroke of midnight. The Greek maiden was still walking serenely at Plato's side, winding her way through the revelers, like a steady ship sailing through a stormy sea. As there might be some novel amusement in waking this nymph out of her calm, Peter rushed directly to the timid Greek maiden.

"Arethusa, I am your slave!" he cried, seizing her hand. "Save me from despair and let me have this midnight dance."

The Greek maiden recoiled, frightened, but in the next moment bowed her head in silent consent and, as the music now began again with special vim and fire, she danced with light, nymph-like steps.

"Are you a follower of Plato?" asked Peter in German, but she made no reply, and kept her eyes downcast. He repeated his question in English, but she remained silent. He tried French, and she was silent still. Whatever her language might be, she seemed a lithe nymph in his arms and he did not care whence she had flown. Perhaps, when she dropped her mask, she would reveal a face of classic Greek beauty? Peter began to be jealous of that Plato who stood watching him dance off with his maiden.

Two minutes of twelve! One—two—three! One, two, three, on and on . . . The music stopped. Silence—then a bacchanalian roar.

Peter tore off his mask.

"You must too!" he cried to the reluctant maiden.

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"That is the rule of the game. If you are Helen of Troy herself, you can't hide your beauty a moment longer."

The silent nymph slowly raised her hand to her mask, lingered before tearing it off, as if she were afraid of something mysterious, then made one more effort . . .

"Virginia!"

Was she an apparition in his fever? Was he mad?

"Virginia, is it really you?" he asked wildly.

"Yes," she broke her long silence meekly. "It is really I."

"But how did you ever—what made you come to this wild place? And how did you know me?"

"By your voice—that's simple," said Virginia bitterly. "And I came here with Mr. Atherton—Plato."

"Atherton here!" exclaimed Peter.

And to be sure, at the other end of the hall stood the philosopher, now unmasked, gazing serenely on the rioting multitude.

"Why didn't you write me you were coming to Munich?" asked Peter, confused.

"Because you owe me a letter for ever so long," said Virginia with an injured note in her voice.

"I know it," said Peter ruefully. "But—but—how happy I am you are here! You can't imagine"

Indeed, how could Virginia understand the full meaning of his strange, sudden joy at seeing her? It was as if a sea-wind had blown into the hot, perfumed air of the dance-hall.

"There are many things I had never imagined before," said Virginia pointedly. "I never guessed people could be so gay."

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Of course she had been watching his wildness all the time, while pacing up and down at Plato's side!

"What made you come at all?" he asked, mortified.

"I wanted to see real artists' life," said Virginia. "So I begged Mr. Atherton to take me along. Do you always kiss the ladies you dance with?" she asked suddenly, with a bewildered glance.

"No, that is only a fashion of Carnival," Peter answered quickly.

"Oh, I'm not so provincial," said Virginia with a forced laugh and a toss of her head. "You needn't think I'm shocked."

"But I know you are," said Peter. "I can read it in your eyes."

Never had Virginia looked so beautiful as in the noble white robe with the gold fillet in her hair, never had she seemed to Peter so youthful as in her bewilderment here in the midst of the reeling, laughing and shrieking horde. Peter's own youth seemed to be calling him away, back to a dewy fragrant garden.

They went to meet Atherton, who though unmasked, was still the serene Plato aloof from the unbridled mortals among whom he was walking, and Peter shook hands heartily with the philosopher.

"You seem to be in your element," said Atherton, not without a tinge of mockery, after his first cordial greeting.

"It must all seem very foolish to you," said Peter. "No doubt, Carnival is an absurd time. But now it is all over; Ash Wednesday has struck. I wonder how you came to know about this ball—and how long have you been here anyway?"

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"Two days," said Atherton. "I knocked at your studio door yesterday, but no one opened it. Then, on the stairs, I met Mr. Woodfin who recognized me and told me that in Carnival time you were not to be found in your studio, but that you would surely be here to-night."

"And Mr. Atherton is staying at the same hotel as Aunt Clarissa and I," said Virginia. "And when he told me about this ball, I begged him to take me too."

"Aunt Clarissa!" Peter exclaimed. "I thought she was in her garden."

"Oh, do you still remember the garden?" cried Virginia. "I thought you had forgotten things at home. We must go—it is late," she said nervously, startled by a sudden roar of laughter from a group behind her.

"If you have seen enough," said Atherton, a little bored, "I am ready to go at any time. Only one word, Peter, about your painting. How is that going?"

"You must come to my studio tomorrow and judge for yourself," said Peter gladly, eager to impress Atherton with his prolific and inspired work. "And you, too, Virginia, must come and see if I have gained any *panache*."

"I'm sure you have that now," said Virginia with a light laugh. "Good night, Peter!"

"Oh, no," said Peter. "I'm going to walk home with you both, if I may."

"But you don't want to leave the ball yet?" said Virginia astonished, though pleasure kindled in her eyes.

Peter gave a short laugh and shrugged his shoulders. For a moment he stood watching the revelers: what were these creatures reeling past him, these wild,

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fantastic men with the sparkle of wine in their eyes, these women whose bare white arms seemed hundreds of lassos thrown out to ensnare? Where was he—was it all a nightmare? Anyway, it was over; he had waked up out of his wild dream, and he was going out into the clear moonlit night with Atherton and Virginia.

As Peter was leading Virginia to the door, a pale woman wrapped in glistening sinuous folds stood fixed, staring at him with a deep, wounded look: it was Cécile. Poor Cécile! Suffering, toiling Cécile! Why had she not broken the spell of his savage frivolity, why had he not gone back to his patient and heroic mate, instead of waiting for Virginia in her innocence and ignorance of toil and pain! There was injustice in all this, but it seemed to have been ordained; so he avoided Cécile's glance and led Virginia away.

On the street Virginia, no longer bewildered by the heat and revelry of the ballroom, now talked more easily and cheerfully, and Atherton seemed to lay his calm on the boisterousness of the night. The philosopher told Peter that he had come to Munich from Oxford to use the University library, and that after two or three weeks he would make a leisurely journey through Italy.

"I wish you would stay here longer," said Peter honestly, eager for the companionship of a tranquil mind in his restless life.

As for Virginia—he could not conceive of her living in Munich where he had been embracing the frivolous adventures that set afire his art. It would have to be Virginia or all the rest, for what had

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wounded even Cécile, the long-suffering and disillusioned, would terrify Virginia.

"We have to leave the day after tomorrow," Virginia's voice broke innocently into Peter's thoughts. "We can't leave mother alone so long in Bozen; we only came here for a little distraction."

That was a simple way out of Peter's dilemma, but it was too simple: he would have liked to see Virginia longer! And, after all, the spell of his reckless life had been shattered when the Greek maiden of Carnival had dropped her mask; he could not go back to it any more.

"Can't you change your mind and stay longer?" he said. "But any way, you must come to my studio tomorrow. I will call for you all—you and Mr. Atherton and Miss Clarissa."

For Peter remembered in time that he was back in a world of etiquette and chaperones. He bade Virginia and Atherton good night at the hotel steps and walked home alone through the noisy streets. Back in his chilly studio, he fell into a deep sleep and dreamed that he was at home painting with Mr. Woodfin in the snowy woods, and when he awoke at ten o'clock it was hard for him to grasp where he might be.

"I'll go right away to see Virginia," he said to himself, as if he were going to stroll down the lane to Miss Clarissa's garden.

When he called at the hotel where Virginia was staying with her aunt, he met the quaint white-haired lady in the lobby.

"Why, Peter!" she exclaimed. "How good it is to see a face from home!"

Peter had not conversed with an old woman since he

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had left Gullport where the old and quaint seemed to have outnumbered the youthful, and a warmth as from a sheltered fireside radiated from Miss Clarissa. In a quiet corner they talked about Virginia's mother at Bozen and about their common friends at home and about the buds that would soon shoot up in the garden when spring would come again. At last Virginia joined them, sprightly and at ease after she had slept away her confusion of last night.

"Now I know you again," she said laughing merrily.

"You knew me before I took my mask off," Peter replied.

"You must have had a very gay party last night," said Miss Clarissa pleasantly, whereupon Virginia whispered to Peter:

"I haven't given Aunt many details."

As none of them had breakfasted yet, although the forenoon was half over, they sat down in a sunny breakfast-room and had a cheerful meal with talk of home, and Peter felt as if he had returned from wandering a long while in an odd, fantastic land. Only when Miss Clarissa asked him about his work and his life in Munich, he found it hard to answer her, for in Virginia's dark eyes there kindled a gleam of suspicion.

"Your mother was always afraid you might be growing too wild and Bohemian!" said the old lady. "But I can tell her that you seem quite respectable. She always found comfort, anyway, in the thought that Jack Woodfin was with you so much—he is someone from home, at least."

Peter thought of Jack who had, no doubt, escorted Cécile after the ball and consoled her in her righteous

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grief and jealousy. He hoped that Cécile would not chance to come out of Vira's studio on the ground floor when he was leading Virginia up the high stairs to his own studio that once had been Cécile's too.

Virginia in his studio! She would forgive him the wildness that she had watched on Carnival night, she would forgive him his Bohemian life when she should see the good fruit of his adventures. Why, she had not seen any of his work since he had painted under the régime of Mrs. Montague! Anticipating Virginia's admiring surprise, Peter laughed and talked merrily with her all the way to the studio, while Atherton followed with Miss Clarissa.

"The stairs are very steep," said Peter apologetically. "I only hope you'll find the climb worth while."

With a thrill of pride Peter opened the studio door.

"How very genuine-looking and artistic!" exclaimed Miss Clarissa. "A true studio!"

"What a jolly place!" cried Virginia. "I never thought a man could make such an inspired home—it looks as if a woman had helped to arrange it."

Thereupon Peter avoided Virginia's glance and thought gratefully of Vira's studio below, where no door had opened in the inopportune moment.

"And now for the pictures!" cried Virginia eagerly.

With pride and joy Peter went to the collection of canvases that he had set up this morning with the painted sides against the wall. What would Virginia say ?

First he showed the "Dancing Gypsy," which had not yet been taken by the buyer, then the portrait of the laughing Heller with his Bacchante, then "Fedora Be-

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fore the Mirror," the most sparkling of all, then his fantastic "Lilith," the white-skinned, golden-haired woman with the great black and green shining serpent coiling round her waist and limbs, then "Behind the Scenes" with its sprightly interplay of varied lights, the spangled skirts of the dancers and the gay saucy faces, and the other pictures that he had painted during the last weeks of artistic fury.

Peter set the paintings up side by side along the wall, like a little gallery, and watched his three visitors contemplate his work—or rather, watched Virginia. She was looking from one to the other with a strangely blank face. The silence was growing oppressive.

It was Atherton who saved the situation from painful awkwardness.

"You have quite a new style now," he said. "You have improved amazingly."

At last! These words were a relief to Peter, especially as they sounded quite honest.

"It is all very brilliant work," said Miss Clarissa timidly, "but to an old-fashioned thing like me these pictures all seem rather foreign. No doubt, if I were younger, I should be able to appreciate them much better"

"They are not what we are used to in New England," said Atherton to the old lady. But Virginia remained silent.

When Atherton had shrewdly called Miss Clarissa to the window to show the fine bird's-eye view of Munich and there engaged her in conversation, Peter could not refrain from asking Virginia:

"Do you still miss the *panache* in my work?"

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"No, there is *panache* enough and to spare," Virginia answered without looking at him. "But"

"But what?" Peter challenged.

Virginia turned round and met his eyes with a deep, horrified glance.

"There is something tainted about all these," she said in a voice that was something between a cry and a whisper. "Peter, what kind of life have you been leading?"

For this outbreak Peter was not prepared. Tainted—tainted! The hideous word rang in his ears as he stood immobile and silent.

"Peter!" Virginia looked at him once more with great glowing eyes. "Where is your vision?"

At first Peter was stunned as if he had been struck, then a vision flashed before his inward eyes: a sea of scarlet poppies was flaming and in the midst a child with radiant golden curls stood laughing in the shower of sunlight. Red poppies! For one blessed moment only the poppies glowed in their pure, joyous red—then impure, purplish tints crept into the color of the petals and lingered there, though he tried with desperate effort to keep them away.

"It's the vision!" cried Peter. "It's the vision that has grown tainted."

It was all over! His work, done in the frenzy that followed wild pleasures, was all a failure: he had been faithless to his vision. Virginia's eyes were glistening with tears.

"Won't you show us your sketches now?" chirped Miss Clarissa and Peter, like someone calling through a haze to people whom he could not see, talked to his

guests and showed them his sketches, though he did not know what they and he himself were saying. Only when they began to say good-by, he woke out of his trance and offered to escort them home.

Peter walked with Miss Clarissa to avoid forced conversation with Virginia, and he was glad when he found himself alone with Maurice Atherton, with whom he had planned to take a walk.

"Well, Peter," said Atherton, "your work is alive at last—no longer a drawing-room decoration."

Peter shrugged his shoulders: no praise, not even Atherton's, could heal the wound Virginia had inflicted.

"To be sure," Atherton continued. "Though the technique is admirable, there is still something about your work that keeps it from being great art—a certain frivolity, perhaps—"

"Oh, how I envy you!" Peter interrupted him with a loud sigh.

"Envy me?" repeated Atherton in his light accent. "For what, I wonder?"

"Give me the man that is not passion's slave!" Peter cried out with a sigh.

"Oh, but I trust you are not really enslaved, Peter," said the philosopher with the faint ironic curl of his lips. "I understand that it was to escape certain delicate chains at home that you fled to Bohème."

"That is it!" sighed Peter. "I fled from one slavery into another. Bohème! Where is the freedom there? I supposed that I was free as a bird, and I see now that too much freedom is the fastest chain of all. It isn't I myself that is fettered—what do I care what becomes

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of myself? It is my art that is maimed—tainted with a false joy . . . tainted”

Bitterly the last word lingered on Peter's tongue; but Atherton smiled.

“If there is nothing to hold you here,” he said, “fly away!”

They had turned into the English Garden, where the frozen snow was sparkling.

“You are right; I ought to leave,” said Peter. “I am weary of it all. I belong neither here nor there.”

“I will tell you where you belong,” said Atherton serenely.

“Oh where?” cried Peter. “Anywhere on this earth?”

“You belong to yourself,” said the philosopher. “You owe your art the solitude that every great artist needs.”

“Solitude?” exclaimed Peter, mysteriously drawn to this new idea. “I am not at all used to being alone. I have made short journeys by myself, of course—but you mean that I should live all alone somewhere like a hermit?”

“You need not live in a hermit's hut, nor wear a hair-shirt,” said Atherton. “But merely tear off all the frail tentacles that coil round you when you move in a community.”

“Solitude—” mused Peter. “There is something alluring about that . . . But the idea of working for months all alone—that seems a little uncanny.”

“Well, let me offer a compromise,” said his companion. “I shall have finished my work here in a week, and I was planning to go on a leisurely stroll through

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Italy and in spring up again to the Italian lakes, and in summer perhaps back to Bavaria. Don't you want to join me? You would practically have your solitude, for I have work enough for myself and I should beg you to ignore my existence—only when you are in a mood to break your silence, now and then, I shall be glad of a little talk."

"Oh, that's a wonderful plan!" cried Peter with boyish ardor.

He saw himself the follower of this serene spirit who walked aloof from and forever smiling down on the passions and struggles of commoners like Peter himself, and he already felt ennobled by the scholar's mere invitation.

"Are we agreed?" asked Atherton. "I should like to leave in about ten days, if that suits you."

"Oh, yes," said Peter eagerly. "That will give me time to pack up my pictures and send them to the jury for the spring exhibition, and to break up here. . . . I am going with you! What a wonderful life that will be!"

During the rest of their walk, Atherton laid out the plans for his journey and to Peter it seemed as if his companion were unrolling a miraculous scroll. To think of wandering through Italy for the first time beside a philosopher and calm lover of beauty! Other joys, the mirth and revels of Bohème, seemed coarse beside these esoteric delights and Peter felt strangely light-hearted, as if he were turning into a rarer and more ethereal substance.

Reluctantly Peter left Atherton and went back to his studio where, on the threshold, he saw Jack Woodfin.

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"There you are!" exclaimed Jack. "I was just going away again."

He followed Peter into the studio and they sat down opposite each other, Jack lighting his pipe and Peter a cigarette.

"I've been to see Cécile," he said gruffly. "And thought I'd come up and see how you were getting on."

Peter's and Jack's good-fellowship had been a little strained since the rupture with Cécile.

"I'm going away, Jack," he broke a lengthy silence. "Soon. I'm going to Italy for a few months."

"Why, man?" asked Jack astonished.

"I need a change," Peter replied.

"Your health seems good enough," said Jack incredulously.

"Oh, my health is all right," said Peter. "But my work needs a change—new surroundings, new influence—new anything! I'm going with Atherton."

"Well, I wish you joy!" said Jack.

When Peter told him that he would break up his studio and that he was not at all sure if he were ever coming back to Munich to live, Jack stared at him as if Peter were moon-struck.

"It's too bad you are going away, old boy," said Jack, rising and slapping Peter on the shoulder. "If it weren't you, I should say you were a fool—but I suppose you have your reasons."

"I have," said Peter and then asked Jack's advice about the sending away of his pictures to the spring exhibition and talked professional gossip until they shook hands at the door.

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"It's too bad you are going away, old man," said Jack again.

"I've had a first-rate winter, I'm sure of that," said Peter. "But it's over now."

When Jack Woodfin's heavy footsteps on the stairs were out of hearing, Peter looked round in his cheerful studio at the sketches on the wall, at the divan where Cécile had often lounged, at the easle, the palette and brushes in disorder, at the candle-sticks and ash-trays and the flask of Chartreuse that reminded him of gaieties now at an end. After all, it was with a heavy heart that he left the enchanted island of Bohème to migrate toward a rarer clime. But now there must be no turning back!

Should he go downstairs now to Vira's studio and say good-by to Cécile whom he would never see again? Should he beg her forgiveness and ask her to remember him kindly and assure her that she had been his good genius on this island of Bohème from which he was going to sail away forever? No, he would wait till the day before his departure, lest Cécile's old spell should make him waver—and he must not now turn back to Cécile who knew nothing of his vision and the bond made in Aunt Clarissa's garden. So instead, although he had left her only two hours ago, Peter went to see Virginia and to tell her that he was once more going to burn his ships behind him and follow her philosopher into a land of contemplation where his vision should lose its taint.

CHAPTER XIII

THE VISION HAS FLED

OLIVE-GREEN shadows from the low mountains over the lake with its lazy boats, a sky of deep, calm blue, a black grove of stone-pine and cypress trees and flat-roofed white houses that seemed to have grown out of the dark mountain-side—these beauties Peter was copying on a small canvas, sitting on a stone at the lake-side in the little village Perlozza. The strong Italian sunbeams were stinging him and, as haste was unnecessary, he laid down his brushes and palette and stretched himself out in the bright green grass by the roadside.

"Il dolce far niente!" he murmured to himself as he shaded his eyes with his straw hat and blinked drowsily at the cloudless sky.

As he lay thus without a care in the wide, sunny world, the last few months of his life floated by him in airy pictures for the eye of his memory. His good-by to Cécile—how far away it seemed now, like a scene that happened to someone else long ago! Her tearless eyes had started as if they were frozen at the sight of him, her laughter, once low and melodious, had rung out wild and clanging when she had cried out bitterly: "We shall never meet again!" The harshness of that moment was mellowed by the haze of distance; the echo

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of her strident laugh had died away in the balmy, tranquil air. It seemed as if he must have eaten of the lotos fruit that brings sweet oblivion and desire for nothing but

In the hollow lotos land
To live and lie reclined.

The moment—much less hazy in Peter's mind!—now came to him in which Maurice Atherton had stood still by the Arno had said:

"Here Dante saw Beatrice for the first time; she was nine years old and wore a scarlet dress."

And these few simple words of his companion had made the Italian poet and his blessed lady spring up out of the hallowed ground with a glory about them, and had made Peter feel as if he himself, like the mediaeval seer led by Virgil along the dwellings of the dead, were being led by his rare companion through the luxuriant fields of the past.

The picture in Florence! How he had seemed to tread on feathery clouds, breathing the rarest air and bathing his forehead in star-beams! There had been no one to wake him out of his contemplation, no one to call him rudely down from the clouds, and his companion had been beckoning onward always, holding a key in his hand that unlocked chambers of history.

Easter at Rome and the grand procession to St. Peter's—what a fragrance of incense and lilies, what an unearthly pageant, what a sonorous organ-like "Te Deum" had overwhelmed Peter's eyes and ears! And Atherton had stood by, smiling at all the glorious beauty as if it had been a work of art for his delight.

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He had smiled in the same way in Pompeii at the golden-brown walls and pillars of the dead city against the live blue sky, at Vesuvius and the gleaming bay. So he had smiled at this very lake with the olive shadows, at the red geranium in the window of that village house across the road. Atherton's smile seemed to Peter, philosophy's sanction of beauty.

Beauty! How could Peter have supposed that he had looked on beauty's face before he had set foot on Italy! Reflections of it, no doubt, had beguiled him all his life, but now the artist's bride was unveiled.

Peter breathed a deep sigh of content as he lay on the grass and thrust his hands into his pockets. What was that letter in his pocket—some old one—that he had forgotten to take out? Oh, it was a scrawl from Jack Woodfin telling Peter that his "Laughing Woman with Mirror," which had been exhibited together with Heller's portrait, had now been sold. Peter had been pleased enough when that news came, but now he was quite indifferent, for the lake was not a bit more lucid or the sky more blue because two pictures of his hung in a gallery in gray Munich and one of them would be hanging in some bourgeois parlor! To be sure, the sale of the picture was helping him to continue his care-free life without concern for the near future, and there was something in that.

A small boat was ruffling the glassy water near the shore, rowed by a handsome brown boy with bare bronze arms and thick black curls, and a calm figure was sitting idly at the stern. The figure was Atherton who landed at the pier, tipped the boy and strolled toward Peter with a book in his hand.

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"Don't get up," he said to Peter. "Go on contemplating while I take a little walk."

"Oh, I wasn't contemplating at all," said Peter. "I am too content to want to think at all."

"Don't throw away your birthright!" Atherton said in a tone of mock-warning.

"What birthright?" asked Peter.

"That of contemplation," said Atherton. "All other pleasures pall."

"All pleasures?" mused Peter, as he packed his tools together.

"Yes, all pleasures," said Atherton. "Even love."

"I would not have let you say that three months ago in Munich," said Peter gaily. "Surely not in Carnival time."

"You were happy in your cups then," returned the philosopher. "And you said with our friend Omar:

"You know, my friends, with what a brave carouse
I made a second marriage in my house,
Divorced old barren Reason from my bed
And took the daughter of the vine to spouse.

"And you see, I have had pity on your divorced spouse and made her my bride."

"I'm afraid she was never really mine," laughed Peter. "But let me have a little intercourse with her now. Or do you think a simple painter has nothing to do with Reason?"

They were walking on the broad road now, along the lake.

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"On the contrary," answered Atherton. "Quite on the contrary. It is Wisdom that tells you:

"Paint! for you know not whence you came, nor why:
Paint! for you know not why you go, nor where."

"For, Peter, you must understand that the grape may turn bitter in your mouth and your ignorance of whence you came and where you go will be small solace then; but of the world that you paint at the dictate of Wisdom you know the whence and the where and the why. You are monarch over that world; there is no bitterness in it and no death."

Peter listened reverently to his master, while they were turning into the village and strolling along the main street. The drowsy spell of noon lay over the low white houses, though there still were women and children on the doorsteps, eating fruits and talking in their melodious tongue. A group of idle men was clustering round a pump where a beautiful black-haired woman with strong arms bare to the shoulder and a sun-browned neck was filling her jug. A little barefoot boy with dust on his brown chubby face pulled Peter by the sleeve and begged for a centesimo. From an open window the broken air of a folksong came floating down.

"It is easy enough to build up this world of beauty that you recommend," remarked Peter, "while one is standing with both feet in Italy."

"Oh, you can build it up anywhere," returned Atherton. "If you shut your eyes to all that is ugly. And, moreover, nothing is ugly if you look at it in a frame, as it were—if you consider it the raw granite with which

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to build your new world. Look at this ragamuffin!" he went on, pointing at the little boy: "here a dirty, tormenting urchin—there a picturesque cherub! The wash on the clothesline between those houses: here family linen—there white flags on an azure field! As Goethe says:

"Am farbigen Abglanz haben wir das Leben."

"Since I have been with you," said Peter. "It has seemed as if philosophers and artists formed a nobility and all the rest of mankind were the common horde."

"So it is," Atherton replied. "We leave the vulgar with their passions behind and wander in our Elysian fields which are not nebulous dream lands at all, but orderly states governed by wisdom, even though they be adorned by fancy."

Peter thought of all whom he had left behind on his journey to these Elysian fields—his father and mother, all his friends at home and even some of his colleagues in Munich whose eyes were fixed too long on earth. But he was not lonely.

In the garden of the little inn the two strollers stopped and ate a rustic meal and drank the ruby-red Chianti, for it was their wont to visit the by-ways and simple nooks on their journey. The noon sunrays were piercing and there was no breeze.

"It is about time to go north," said Atherton, wiping his brow.

"I hate to leave the lakes, though," sighed Peter, "now I have grown so used to cypress and poplar trees and cloudless skies—how shall I learn to mix grays again?"

"Oh, there are subtler landscapes in store for you," said

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his companion. "I shouldn't think of forcing Switzerland on you. I don't want you to paint panoramas, and if you want intimate nooks, you don't need Mont Blanc for a background. But let me show you the Black Forest! You see, Peter, your landscape here by Lake Lugano, like all the Italian landscapes, is finite: the placid lake, the mountains with serene curves, the fan-shaped stone-pines, the low, flat-roofed houses, all seem inclosed in a ring, content in themselves, like a Greek temple or a perfect sonnet. But in the Black Forest you will find white films of mist blurring the outlines of shadowy woods, pines and hemlocks aspiring blindly to the sky, church steeples, Gothic, mystic abandon."

"Take me there!" cried Peter. "Let me paint mists and elusive woods. Perhaps, after all, I have had enough strong sunlight and sharp shadows. And even if there should be sunshine in the Black Forest, the beauty of the landscape there will be less perfect—less——"

"Less ripe," finished Atherton. "Less like a mellow fruit dropping into your lap. There will be more to grope for—to guess at . . . Suppose we start tomorrow?"

Peter consented. As long as his modest funds held out, there was no reason why this exquisite life of leisurely sketching, discourse and meditation should cease. There was time enough in chill autumn to go back to his noisy colleagues in Munich or to drudgery at home. In these days Peter did not like to look beyond the morrow, nor even to avert his gaze from the timeless beauty of the hour. There was time enough!

So Peter and his master lingered over their Chianti to plan out their journey northward to the Titisee in the Black Forest, while the maid, a buxom, black-eyed peas-

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ant, watched the two strangers keenly, especially the charming gentleman with the dark moustache, who did not pay the tribute of a single glance to her beauty. When they had risen at last, they sauntered languidly to the boat-landing and took the steamer across the lake to Paradiso, where they had their lodgings. Peter looked into the clear green-gray water and up at the gentle slopes of the mountains, with their gray barren stretches and their woods of olive green. With a parting pang he gazed back at the low, flat-roofed houses on the mountain sides, white houses with red geraniums at the windows, and at the single cypress trees silhouetted in all their finished beauty, as if by design.

"Lugano—Paradiso!" sighed Peter, as if all the beauty of the lake were captured in those two names.

"Tomorrow night we shall be sailing across Lake Lucerne," said Atherton. "No more olive shadows then."

"I think I caught them in my sketch this morning," said Peter, "but it will have to stay unfinished."

Indeed, Peter's Italian sketches were almost all unfinished, colored moods thrown on to canvas without ambition. Perhaps, in a more northern climate, he would find energy again to make a complete picture. Here in Italy the spirit of "*il dolce far niente*" had touched him even in his art.

The next day Peter and Atherton passed through the St. Gotthard, and the night they spent in Lucerne, cooled by Alpine breezes and the freshness of the lake. And the following day they journeyed northward to the Titisee in the Black Forest. After they had left the Jura Mountains and entered Baden, the sky grew more and more cloudy,

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and when they reached Freiburg, veils of mist hung on the mountains. From the train window Peter saw the beautiful cathedral spire, delicate like lacework of stone, rise into the gray sky high above the gabled houses; he saw the blurred outlines of the black forests on the mountains round the town, and mist that seemed, like incense, to rise upward from the ground in something of an ecclesiastical mystery.

"You are right," said Peter to his companion, "this is Gothic and mystic—and there is a more elusive beauty here than in Lugano."

"You must shut your Renaissance eyes," said Atherton, "and dream of the Middle Ages."

"Whether Renaissance or the Dark Ages," Peter replied, "that makes no difference to me. I only see what I see and know that it is beautiful."

They spent two hours in Freiburg and then, by a small local train and a stage-coach, reached their destination, a rural hotel on the shores of the dark mountain lake called the Titisee. The lake near the shore was black with a golden gleam here and there, like the luster of coal, and farther away, screened by white mist. The heavy black boughs of the hemlock trees seemed weighed down by the burden of some secret of the woods, and the drippings from the branches were like the whisperings of elves.

"Romantic—eh?" remarked Atherton, as they lingered to glance at the lake once more before stepping into the house.

Peter nodded. He felt faithless to Italy, as if he were forgetting a fiery-eyed, stately Roman love for a dreamy northern damsel.

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"I must finish my chapter on æsthetics here," said the philosopher, "so I sha'n't disturb you at all."

And Atherton ket his word throughout their first week at the Titisee. They met usually at meals, except when Peter was gone for the day with his paint-box and easel on tramps through the woods, but for the rest of the time each went on his own way; even the long, quiet evenings each would spend in his own room, Atherton to continue his work, Peter to read books that his companion and guide had lent him—books of art criticism, poetry and philosophic meditation.

So Peter would step out to the lakeside every morning with his mind tuned to the mystic beauties of the wood. As the sky continued to be cloudy and the air dimmed by haze, Peter felt on his wanderings as if he were walking through a sacred forest veiled by curtains of mist from the exoteric gaze. His ear grew keen to understand the songs of birds, the rustling of squirrels on the boughs and the murmur of the wind in the branches; his eye made friends with the many quaint varieties of moss, the delicate lace-work ferns, the speckled toadstools, the frail bluebells at his feet, and he learned to know the strong, moist aromas of the herbs and needles on the rich, black soil. Then, when between showers he could quickly paint a sketch, he would try to hold fast all the exquisite tidings that the forest had brought to his senses, as if the eye were spokesman for them all. He would paint a scroll of fog unrolled on a mountain side, a waterfall sparkling between black pines, a glimpse of the Titisee with its black shadows, or only a grove of somber hemlock trees. But half the time he would not paint at all, only feel the landscape and communicate with the elfin spirits of the

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woods that were whispering and murmuring in the branches. The sweetness of solitude touched him with a mysterious beguilement and peopled the silent woods with a host of ethereal companions. Whenever, during his lonely tramps, figures from his former life slipped into his reveries—Cécile or Mrs. Montague, friends from Bohème or friends from home—in his memory they became rarified, made of the same substance as the fairy creatures in the forest. There was nothing to draw Peter away and the day glided past in a beguiling monotony of delight.

After two weeks of mists and raindrops, the sun began to scatter the clouds and gradually to unveil itself in its true summer glory. The sky turned clearer and brighter, till at last it wore even an Italian blue. The Titisee varied its tints with the sky, though along the banks the shadows from the trees were still the old sombre black; and the forest paths were shadowy and mysterious as before, except for the gleam of sunbeams through the branches and the golden spots they made on the ground.

"You will have to paint a different landscape today," said Atherton, who for the first time took his books out to work under the trees.

"Yes," replied Peter, "and I am going to leave the woods for the day and go to the village, where I can see more of the sun."

"Your eyes are used to mist now," continued Atherton, "the sun will dazzle you. Good luck! When you come back, you will still find me in the shade—but not sporting with Amaryllis."

"That's gone by for me, too," said Peter, with no little

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pride in the serenity and aloofness of spirit that he had learned from his master.

Cheerfully Peter took the steep path up a mountain that led to the village Saig on the airy plateau that had no trees to shut out the sun. As he walked on the yielding ground and brushed against the dewy branches of the young trees and the spicy fragrance of moss and herbs rose to his nostrils like a familiar greeting, Peter's heart sang within him. Whenever he came to a clearing, he had to turn round and look back at the lake that now lay blue and glittering in its bed of black mountain slopes, and at the Feldberg, the highest mountain of all, that towered above the Titisee.

When Peter reached the village, he took off his hat and bathed his face in the warm, benevolent sunlight. The houses, all quaint and cheerful to look at, were of white plaster with dark beams running through the walls, and pointed roofs; or of brown wood with very low roofs that sloped almost to the ground, with high stairs and little balconies and porches; and on the steeple of the white church was a big stork's nest. Rosy children laughed mischievously at him on his way, and chickens scurried across his path. Peter rested in the garden of a little inn, where he ordered his rural noon dinner and ate it while the hens ate theirs at his feet, and the landlord made conversation, asking Peter whence he came and whither he was going. The landlord's red-cheeked blond daughter stood near by, knitting a thick stocking and listening with open mouth.

Leisurely Peter left the hospitable inn, after he had lingered there for some time, and strolled about in search of a sunny spot, to paint a sketch that should be quite dif-

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ferent from his hazy or somber studies of the last two weeks. He chose a grassy slope and the side of a peasant cottage with a low, overhanging roof and a high, hazardous looking flight of stairs that led to the side door; a broad, round apple tree touching the roof with its foliage; in the background wooded mountains and a forget-me-not blue sky.

Peter had scarcely begun to paint when a chubby little boy, perhaps six years old, who was biting lustily into a big, thick piece of black bread, tripped timidly up behind him and watched the strange conjury. A goose-girl followed, coming down the path with her chattering flock, then a boy with a fishing-rod and a bunch of brook trout; then more children, ten or twelve years old, ruddy, barefoot boys and girls, who stopped their singing to stand behind the strange painter and stare. Last of all came the innkeeper's daughter, in her comely peasant dress, with the short black skirt, bright green apron, velvet laced bodice and white puffed sleeves, and stood with the rest to watch, still knitting her stocking with nimble hands. There was some nudging, some sniffing laughter, some stepping on one another's bare feet among the children, but little conversation except in whispers and words that Peter did not understand. The geese grew impatient and roused the goose-girl out of her reverie; the little boy with the black bread—now all eaten up—ran after geese and goose-girl with a shout of joy; the boy with the fishing-rod went his way, and the children gradually dispersed. Only the innkeeper's daughter stayed behind, still knitting away in silence.

"Where do you come from?" she finally broke the calm in her quaint Black Forest accent.

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"From down there by the Titisee," answered Peter, in his Munich German.

"Oh!" said the lass, and knitted on.

She could not be more than fifteen, though she was broad-shouldered and strong, and her bright, blue eyes had the wondering look of a child.

"But you are only a summer guest, aren't you?" she began again. "You don't belong here?"

"You are right," said Peter, "I don't belong here. But I love the Titisee so much that I never want to go away."

"But aren't you afraid—isn't it uncanny?" she asked, with wide-open eyes.

"What?" asked Peter.

"The Titisee," she replied. "Don't you know?"

Peter shook his head.

"There is a sunken city down at the bottom," she said, in an awe-struck tone. "Sometimes at night you can hear the church bells ring. . . . Have you never heard them?"

"No," said Peter, "but I will go to the lake at midnight now, and not go to bed till I have heard the bells."

"Oh, they don't ring always," she explained eagerly, "only once in a great while. Do you know why the city had to sink into the lake?" she asked in a voice fraught with secrets.

"No—tell me," said Peter, turning round from his work.

"Because the people in that city were so wicked," she said impressively. "They were wicked and idle and wasteful—so wasteful that they walked on bread crusts for shoes. Then their punishment came, and the whole city sank down deep to the bottom of the lake."

"Oh!" exclaimed Peter. "How terrible and how won-

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derful! Is the Titisee very, very deep, do you suppose?"

"Nobody knows," she answered, "and nobody can ever know. Because once a man began to measure how deep it was with a line that he let down from his boat, and then a voice called up from the deep: 'If you measure me I will swallow you!' Then he was frightened to death, of course, and rowed to shore as fast as he could, and, of course, no one has dared to measure the depth since."

"Of course not!" said Peter, and resumed his painting.

Again she watched him silently for a while, then said abruptly:

"Have you no work?"

"This is my work," said Peter.

"Oh!" said the child, puzzled. "That doesn't seem like real work—more like play."

"It gives me just as much joy as if it were play," said Peter.

"But what do you do with it after it is done?" she asked simply.

"I hang it on my wall," Peter replied, "or somebody else hangs it on his wall."

There was nothing lifelike as yet on Peter's canvas, so that he could hardly blame the child for her doubt.

"Do other people want pictures like that?" she asked; "do they buy them?"

Peter nodded.

"Even if they didn't," he said, loftily, "I should paint them, all the same."

"Just for yourself?" asked the child, in a tone of wonder.

"Yes," said Peter, "just for myself."

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The child lingered yet awhile, then said :

"I have to go and help mother in the kitchen. Good-by."

"Good-by," he replied. "I shall come again and then I'll ask for you at your father's inn, my little friend."

Peter raised his hat, whereupon she laughed merrily and marched away briskly, while her blonde braids fluttered in the wind.

There she was hurrying to help with the daily work, leaving him, as she supposed, to frivolous idleness! The child left a dim soreness in his heart. Was it the wonder in her big blue eyes that had taken hold of him and made him wonder, too? "Just for yourself?" she had asked, so puzzled and estranged. And perhaps she was right: was he joining in any work? What was he offering to his fellow-men?

Nothing. He was isolated from the working and playing world, alone with a master whose words he gathered up like rose leaves strewn at his feet, and to whom he had nothing to give in turn. Solitude was enticingly sweet, but it had a bitter kernel.

Peter sketched till well into the afternoon, then he packed his tools together, planning to come again. Before he should turn into his homeward path, he wanted to stroll about a little on the green, sunny plateau. The cheerful tinkle of herd-bells in the clear air as the cattle trudged down the road from the wide pastures, and the fresh, homely scent of hay drew Peter on. Fields of golden rye were now swaying in the light breeze, and the sunburnt peasants were tramping home.

How could he look these sturdy workers in the face, he who roamed in solitude and sucked the honey of contemplation, who painted as he might sing to himself in

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the woods, who had spun a cocoon round himself to escape harsh sounds and sights from the world without!

The wondering eyes of the child were haunting him still, and her voice of awe as she had told him about the Titisee. Was he not like the inhabitants of the sunken city, idle, frivolous and wasteful of these golden days? Was he not, as it were, treading on the bread of life with careless, wayward feet? Would his spirit, too, like the city of the Titisee, sink into a depth of darkness and of death?

A weariness of spirit came over Peter. Would this dream-life go on forever? No, he had known from the start that it could not, that it was only a passing stage of solitary contemplation before he would set out again on some new path. Where that path was and whither it would lead he did not know, and his spirits were too languid for a search. For the present—while the summer lasted, at least—he would linger in Lotos-land and let the future take care of itself. Thoughts of the future, of late, had filled him with a loathing, because the present hour had smiled beguilingly and he had heard no warning to “heed the rumble of a distant drum.” So now he shook the alarming thoughts out of his mind lightly, as he shook dust from his shoes, and turned into the path to the Titisee, where the philosopher was waiting in the forest.

CHAPTER XIV

THE VISION AGAIN

PETER was back again in his old studio in Munich—but it seemed no longer the same old studio. Another man's sketches were hanging on the wall, another man's relics, ash-trays, candle-sticks and wine-glasses were strewn about, besides fencing-foils and sabers that were foreign to the New Englander. It had happened oddly enough that in the breakfast-room of the hotel, where he had spent the first night back in Munich with Atherton, he should have met Hartung, who was setting out for a tramp in the mountains. Then Hartung had told him that he had rented and lived in Peter's studio during his absence, and had then invited Peter to live in his former haunt until Hartung should come back from the mountains. Further, Peter was told that his own pictures, sketches and relics that he had put under Jack Woodfin's care had been intrusted to Hartung for some time, while Jack had been away on a vacation—where, Hartung did not know, for Jack's departure had been mysterious and sudden. So Peter had become once more the keeper of his own treasures, which otherwise would have been left unguarded, locked in the dusty studio; and, moreover, the inhabitant of his old workshop.

Cécile's studio, which he had sought finally, after much

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hesitation, he had found deserted ; for Cécile, as the janitor told him, had gone away on a vacation with her cousin Vira. Though it was a relief to Peter that he would not have to meet her again after their last good-by, life in Munich seemed unnatural without at least the possibility of meeting Cécile.

So, just as he felt out of place in his old studio with its new decorations, now that he was without his regular work and his old friends, who were almost all away in the mountains or at some artist's colony in the country, he felt estranged in his so familiar Munich. Indeed, if Atherton had not needed the University library, and if Peter had not been under the spell of the philosopher and reluctant to part with his guidance, Peter would not have gone back to Munich so soon. But as it was, he had followed his master and was now back in his old workshop, with no incentive to work. While Atherton spent his days in the library, Peter roamed about the city alone, like a tourist, accustomed as he was for the last months of travel to go every day on a hunt for beauty.

One Sunday morning, when he was strolling through the Shack Gallery, he was impressed by the eager faces of the country people and simple citizens for whom the pictures were messages from a bright land remote from their thrifty work-a-day world.

"Look, mamma, here it is!" cried a little fourteen-year-old girl, in a stiff white dress, with a wreath of corn-flowers on her hat. "We saw it in a picture-book in school."

It was the picture by Schwindt of a young girl looking out of the window at the mountains early in the morning, that made the little maiden's eyes beam, and brought a

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happy smile on the pale, tired face of her mother. Peter sighed: when would a work of his bring a gleam of happiness to a tired face through an echo from a seraphic world where cares for daily bread, sickness and weariness cannot penetrate? Surely, not the unfinished sketches from his journey—exquisite glimpses of a drowsy lake, of mist on a mountain side, of a gloomy pine grove, of a quaint alley or a lonely cypress tree—held fast imperfectly without seriousness, without true joy, without soul.

When he was meditating thus mournfully, he suddenly felt the pressure of a hand on his arm.

"Why so sad?" asked a cheerful voice.

It was the Dowager Empress, buxom and exuberant.

"What have you been doing with yourself all these months?" she asked in her good-natured, motherly voice.

"Oh, just wandering about idly," answered Peter, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"What luxury!" exclaimed the good-natured woman, without a tinge of envy. "Now, I am going to Salzburg tomorrow for a little week to get a breath of mountain air, my first vacation trip in five years, and I consider myself lucky. But I'm glad for you, my son, and I want to hear about your vacation. Come, take a little walk with me in the sunshine. I've just had my Sunday glimpse at my favorites."

Peter consented, and they walked along the lively streets among the happy folk in Sunday attire, who were rejoicing in the sunshine. He had to give an account of his journey to his kind listener, and when he had satisfied her good-natured curiosity, he began to inquire about the doings of their common friends.

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"Where is Jack?" he asked. "Hartung said that he had gone off suddenly and mysteriously."

The Dowager Empress looked at Peter with a sly, puzzling glance. "You mean that you don't know?" she asked curiously.

"No, why should I?" Peter replied. "We don't write each other. Jack is no correspondent."

"So you really don't know?" the Dowager Empress went on, in a tantalizing way.

"No, really not," said Peter, with waning patience. "You are uncanny!"

"Jack has gone into the Tyrol," she said impressively, "on his honeymoon—so to speak—with Cécile."

Peter stood in the middle of the street. So his surmise had been right: Jack's compassion for Cécile had turned into passion! He remembered now that, before he had left Munich, he had thought—not without a pang—such a course natural and apt for Jack and for Cécile, and surely he was thinking so still, only his heart for an instant seemed to stop beating.

"You dropped the wild rose on your careless walk," said his companion, with kindly mockery, "and, you see, Jack stooped and picked it up."

"Perhaps Jack deserved her more than I," said Peter, with a sigh.

"How unnatural for you to be resigned—and that after such a fine vacation journey, too," remarked his companion; "I always thought of you as a jolly good fellow."

"Oh, do think of me that way still," said Peter. "That's the self I left behind in Munich when I went away after Carnival, but I can't seem to find it again, now that I'm back."

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"You are Peter Schlemiehl who has lost his shadow," laughed the Dowager Empress, "or, rather, the shadow who has lost Peter."

Though the older woman's hearty companionship pleased Peter, he could not reveal to her his change of heart wrought by a philosopher's magic wand; so he led her artfully into the realm of gossip, and she lingered there with much laughing and winking of her mischievous eyes. When she came back to Cécile in her accounts, she grew sober.

"They did it very artfully," she said. "They by no means vanished at the same time. Cécile went ahead with Vira, who was probably soon sent off to seek her own adventures, and Jack followed a week later. I knew, because Cécile told me, and I supposed you knew because you had been so intimate with both. Heller suspected, but he is always suspecting something. By the way, did you know his design for the fountain won the prize?"

Thus the kindly woman chatted on, and Peter would have invited her to dine with him somewhere in the country, away from the hot pavements, had he not promised to meet Atherton; and the philosopher and the Dowager Empress did not seem to Peter a good pair. So, as she was going to leave Munich the next morning, he said good-by to his kind friend, not without regret.

While he had been listening to her gossip, Peter had felt once more as if he belonged into his Bohemian circle, but no sooner had Atherton walked into the restaurant where Peter was waiting for him, than he seemed again to be Rip Van Winkle returned after a hundred years. .

"What have you been doing this morning?" said Atherton.

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"Gossiping," answered Peter.

The philosopher did not ask with whom he had gossiped, as, indeed, Atherton seemed to lack all natural curiosity about private affairs.

"I've been gossiping with Aristotle," he said. "It's all the same."

"Tell me about it," asked Peter. "My head feels so empty. I should like to fill it up with philosophy."

"Oh, very well," answered Atherton, and while the portly family at the table beside them was joking with the waiter and studying the bill of fare with loud enthusiasm, Peter listened to his master's wisdom. They might have been sitting at the Lake of Lugano as well as in a Munich restaurant, or in a pine grove of the Black Forest, or on the beach at home, for wherever Peter happened to be with Atherton, his spirit lay reclined in lotos land.

But when Atherton had returned to his studies, Peter fell rudely back to earth. The Sunday throng was streaming past him: little girls with white dresses and flower hats; cheerful, smug fathers and mothers holding little children by the hand; soldiers arm in arm with their sweethearts; young fellows in highland costume starting out for long tramps in the country. Peter walked alone. To beguile the remainder of the afternoon and the evening in the open air, he rode to the exhibition grounds outside of the city, where, besides the present exhibition of Bavarian industry, there were revivals of old puppet-plays, military band concerts, illuminated fountains and a great air of gaiety. Peter wandered over the decorative grounds until nightfall, when he chose a little table for himself in the pavilion of the gayest restaurant in the park. A cello soloist was playing Wolfram's

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"Song to the Evening Star." Sitting close to the path where the merry throng floated by, Peter watched the sprightly tête-à-têtes of youths and gaily-dressed damsels; he listened to laughter that shot up like spray and dissolved out of ear-shot, to fragments of tender or jovial discourse. Fragments—fragments all to the bystander who had no more love of his own, no more youthful comradeship, no more holiday because of no more hard work!

The fountain opposite the pavilion was being illuminated, and a spontaneous "Oh!" rose from the numerous lips. Orange-golden glowed the delicate upward shooting and downward dripping streams of water, then cool blue and green, then rose, and finally blood-red. The melancholy "Evening Star" had given way to Tannhäuser's passionate song to Venus. The music and the fountains seemed to blend together and make of the park a gay fairyland of love and song and laughter. Only Peter was outside.

Was he longing for Cécile? No, he did not want Cécile back, for if she were sitting opposite him now, the magic luster of their bond would be gone, just as the miraculous orange-golden glow on the fountain vanished whether he would keep it or not.

He was alone. Till midnight he lingered, sipping Rhine wine in the pavilion, listening to the plaintive or sprightly melodies, then walking up and down among others' friends and lovers, like a beggar who would warm himself by the sight of others' feasting.

When he rode home, a cool, moist wind was chilling the air, and Peter came back to his studio shivering. Scarcely had he gone to bed when rain beat down on the roof, and the even noise kept him awake till four o'clock.

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Then he floated off into a light sleep with bad dreams, till well into the morning. Why should he get up when there was nothing to get up for? He might stay in bed all day, and nobody would be aware of his absence, not even Atherton, who was at this time all absorbed in his studies. This morning even the Dowager Empress would be gone, his last good friend in Munich, and his mere acquaintances he was not in a mood to seek.

Because, after all, his limbs were healthy even though his spirits were faint, Peter got up, went to the neighboring café for breakfast, and returned to the studio as if for work, although there was no work to do. It was raining drearily outside.

Why could he not hire a model and paint as he used to paint before his fatal journey? Fatal indeed, for it had killed in him all vigor for work beyond the leisurely sketching of moods and glimpses, just as it had killed his joy in laughter and carefree love! Peter looked out of the window. Market women were tramping through the rain, carrying baskets on their heads; the letter carrier was marching along with his heavy bag, and busy passers-by were scurrying across the street as if each were bent on some important mission. To see people hurrying to their morning business was more painful even than to see them at their nightly merrymaking, to an isolated idler. Peter wondered why he was living at all, when it made no difference whether he was alive or dead.

Of course, he might shake himself and with a manly effort begin work in his old, regular way. But at the thought a great weariness of spirit overwhelmed him, and besides, there was no subject in the wide world that he wanted to paint. And why should he force himself to

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work against his will when nobody cared? Peter felt quite dispensable, a careless drop too much in the universe.

Should he go to the studio of one of his many colleagues in the neighborhood to seek stimulus and cheer? Peter shrank from such a plan, because he had been spoiled for harmless comradeship: intercourse for months with Atherton alone had made him look on other men as vulgar!

And what was the fruit of these rare months with the philosopher? Pessimism—a pessimism that sapped his power to work and his joy to live! What should he do? Peter sat on his couch and stared at the gray, cracked floor; he hated himself, he was tired of his life, he wished he had never been born. Some people drank certain powerful liquids when they felt like this, and never felt any more at all. . . .

There was a knock at the door, but Peter did not answer: let the intruder think that he was out! The door was opened and the postman threw in a letter. A blue stamp was on it—from home! He snatched it and saw Virginia's handwriting. Virginia—how dared she intrude into these gloomy, poisonous thoughts! Had she come to spy upon him, to laugh at him in his despair?

DEAR PETER:

I suppose your rare journey with Mr. Atherton is over and you are back in Munich again, happy in your work, with your congenial friends, living the life that you have chosen. How I envy you! I ought not to envy you—I ought to be glad that you have found the life that makes you happy. But can you imagine not being able to paint, and still living on?

If you can, then have a little pity for me! I can't sing any more. I try every day, but I feel as if there had been a great forest fire

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in my heart that had left nothing but barren tree-stumps and black waste.

I am so lonely. If there were only a soul in your home town and mine who cared for the things we care about! They think me queer and it's the worst crime in Gullport to be queer. Father doesn't see why I'm not having the time of my life playing auction and dancing with dull boys; mother is so tired that I don't want to worry her with my own woes. They are such ethereal woes, too, that I could never tell about them, but they are quite real just the same. I go into Aunt Clarissa's garden—do you remember the bower there?—and cry and cry.

Oh Peter, if you were only here! You are the one soul who would understand; you always did understand. I wish you were coming back.

Faithfully yours,
VIRGINIA.

P.S. At first I thought I would tear up this foolish letter, but now I am sending it after all.

All at once the world was transformed for Peter. He ran back and forth, read the letter over again, folded it, put it into his pocket, took it out again and read it once more.

Was it true—quite true? Peter ran his finger along the line: "I wish you were coming back." Yes, it was truly written, black on white!

A tired and lonely soul was calling to him for help. He was not living in vain, he was not superfluous, not a drop too much in the universe! And the soul that was clamoring for him was Virginia.

Virginia! What a fool he had been, what an utter fool! Why had he left her, almost forgotten her while he was wandering astray in foreign lands? He knew now that he

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had always loved her, that they had been born under the same star, that he had been erring, and that his eyes had been opened at last. He would fly to her and help her—but how? Must he be impotent to help her who had come to his aid twice as the keeper of his vision? . . . His vision!

Red poppies flamed before his inward eye, radiant, glorious, and in the midst of the scarlet sea stood a child with curls of glistening gold; and over all streamed brilliant sunlight. The vision was there: he held it fast, and it should never, never flee again!

In frantic haste he rushed to a corner of the studio, rummaged among the canvases there, found the extra large one that he had already stretched, put it on the easel which he moved quickly to the window, took up an old piece of charcoal and sketched in the composition for his work. Oh, the drawing was the least part of this picture, for his vision was in glowing colors—even the brightest red!

The light was very poor, but he would begin to paint in spite of it, lest, if he waited for sunshine, the vision should fly away. So, when the time came, Peter began to paint. Red—red—there was never enough red on his palette! First he wanted to mass the colors, and then he would paint the child and the poppies with unequalled care. If it should take him a year to paint this picture, he would not tire of it for a moment. . . .

Neither would he return to Virginia until this painting should be finished, even though she might be disappointed, for this should be his gift to her, his artist's help for her despondency, his surrender of the vision.

All day Peter worked, not stopping for a meal, except

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some crackers that he found in a box on his table and a cordial; all day, though the rain kept pouring down and the air was chilly, he warmed his heart by the fiery red of his poppies. Mysteriously he felt that this was the greatest day of his life, although he was all alone in a cold, dark studio and he had begun the day in despair. The vision was always there, and before he would touch his brush to the canvas, he would consult it: "Is my red flaming enough?" "Has my sunlight enough glow?" And the vision would never fail to answer from its inaccessible height and show him his error.

A knock at the door startled Peter who had forgotten that there was anything else in the world but his vision and his canvas to reflect it.

"Come in!" he called, unwillingly.

"So fanatic!" Atherton exclaimed lightly, as he came into the studio. "Do you remember that we were to meet at seven, and now it is eight!"

"Oh—I'm sorry—I'm sorry," mumbled Peter. "I suppose I must stop now."

"Why this sudden fervor?" asked Atherton, approaching the easel.

"Oh, don't look—please don't!" cried Peter, like an excited child, standing in front of the canvas. "Nobody must see this until it is done!"

"Oh, very well," said Atherton, with a tranquil smile, "this seems to be a very passionate kiss of the Muse."

Peter covered his precious canvas with a cloth, and followed his companion to the restaurant where they had planned to meet, and where Atherton had already waited an hour. Now Peter felt that he was hungry and tired, although he could have painted on through the night. If

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one could only paint by lamplight! Well, daylight would dawn again soon, and he would get up early in the morning.

They were rather silent tonight, for Peter could not give the philosopher the attention that he was wont to bestow upon him. When they had nearly finished, Atherton, who did not seem to mind Peter's absent-mindedness in the least, said gaily:

"You don't know, Peter, that I have finished my work here—that is, I don't need the library any more—and that I am quite ready now for the mountains. What do you say to Berchtesgaden?"

Peter was silent. He would not stir out of Munich until the picture was finished, and if Hartung should come back at the end of the month and claim his studio—why, then Peter must move into another. If he should follow his guide into the mountains now and take up again the life of leisurely meditation and sipping of esoteric pleasures, who knew but that languor and indifference might come over him again and weaken the heart and the hand that must paint his great picture—perhaps even make the vision fly away!

How could he tell Atherton about his fears? For, though he was a wise philosopher, Atherton would never understand Peter's vision—perhaps because it was not of the understanding. It was hard now to break loose from his companion and guide without seeming capricious and ungrateful. And besides, after all, he was giving up a rare and exquisite life!

"You are silent," said Atherton.

"I'm—I'm—I'm—very, very sorry," stammered Peter, "but I can't go with you any more."

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"How does that happen?" asked Atherton, calmly.

"I shall never have such a rare time again as I had with you in Italy, and by the lakes, and in the Black Forest," said Peter, unsteadily. "I'll never forget it. I'm mighty grateful to you. But, you see, I've begun this new picture . . ."

"And can't you take that with you?" asked Atherton, with a faintly sarcastic smile, "and finish it somewhere else? I didn't see you work with a model."

"No, I have to finish it here," said Peter eagerly; "if I went away, I might be distracted. I sha'n't stir out of Munich till it is perfect—if I have to stay here a year and a day!"

"And pray," asked Atherton serenely, "what is the subject of this absorbing work?"

"I can't tell you," said Peter, irritated by the philosopher's calm, "because you wouldn't understand."

"Indeed!" said Atherton, with unruffled composure, raising his eyebrows in delicate irony.

"You are a pessimist!" cried Peter, forgetting the awe that Atherton had always inspired in him. "You shun life for isolated contemplation—and I must have life itself in my new work—life, with its will and zest and joy!"

"So you are tired of contemplation," said Atherton, with his haughty smile, "and I shall have to go on alone."

How little Atherton seemed to care whether Peter followed him or not! This piqued Peter, but on the other hand, he was relieved from a guilty sense of having given offence. He did not know whether to envy Atherton for his untroubled aloofness from the passions that swayed and broke the hearts of common men, or whether to pity him because he stood apart from the warm tide of life.

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"I hope it will be a very great picture," said Atherton. "Such a rebellion against another's views of life is a sign of artistic health."

"How strange it seems to hear you say that," replied Peter; "you, who never rebel against any view—you, who only smile at all views but your own."

"I am not the artist," said Atherton. "It is for youth like yours to rush on in its blindness and ardor and create works out of its passion. It is for ageless contemplation like mine to judge these works and say: 'Look, here is beauty!'"

Peter seized Atherton's hand and shook it in an outburst of gratitude.

"How easy it is for you to forgive," he said, eagerly. "You are a true philosopher."

"And when the picture is finished," Atherton interrupted, "will you take up your life of Bohème once more?"

"No," said Peter, "then I am going home—I have summons home."

"So we shall meet again when college has opened and I go back to my academic routine in September," Atherton remarked, cheerfully; "perhaps on Mrs. Montague's piazza."

"Mrs. Montague!" he exclaimed. "How long ago it seems—how could I ever . . .?"

"How could you ever have dangled at her apron-strings?" said Atherton. "You will ask yourself how you could have done many things before you are old. She was a part of your education, so was I. . . . And now, let us see if you have found yourself."

Till midnight Peter sat with his companion, now no

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longer the master over his spirit, drinking champagne to celebrate their last night together, and talking as if there had never been a shadow of discord between them. And, indeed, there had been none, for Peter understood that where there was no resistance against rebellion, there was no discord, and that for this philosopher there could never be a jarring note in the serene and haughty harmony of his mind.

"Good-by," were Atherton's last words. "I shall look for something distinguished from you."

Then Peter climbed up to his studio and sank into the deepest, most restful sleep that he had slept for months. When he woke up, rain was still beating on the roof and the city looked dreary and gray from the window. But there was a light that radiated from within him into every shadowy corner of his dark studio. Today he would work in sober earnest after the first inspired beginning had been made; and he would work every day from early morning till dusk, as long as the vision stayed. For the vision had survived the long evening with Atherton and the deep sleep of the night, and it was flaming before his mind's eye with its first glory.

Peter searched all his sketches of little girls that he could find to use for his painting of the child; but though he used them as aids for his drawings, the true child with its sparkling eyes and radiant golden curls had to be copied from the vision itself. And as for the red poppies—he scorned to buy poppies from the peasant women on the marketplace to use as models, because no poppies in the gardens and fields about Munich had a redness as bright as the scarlet in his heart.

And the vision was a stern task-master. Work that

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at other times would have satisfied Peter, now left him no peace on the steep path to perfection. Never had he painted over so much that had already been done with careful labor; never had he made so many separate studies for one big picture, as in these days of intense work. He would go to bed early, so that he could wake up at five o'clock, boil his tea on a little kerosene stove that Hartung had left in the studio, eat the rolls that the baker's boy brought him early in the morning for breakfast, and then start out to work when the city was just beginning to stir beneath his window.

For two weeks it rained every day, and although it was August, the studio was chilly. Then the summer sun dried the pavements, cleared the sky and beckoned out of doors. Now that gradually some of Peter's friends—among them the Dowager Empress—were coming back from their vacations, he met them occasionally at supper in the Zoological Gardens or some rural place outside of Munich, but he let no one visit his studio, and till dusk he worked alone. Hartung and Heller had not come back, nor Jack and Cécile, to his great relief, for he feared lest embers of an old passion, though supposed dead, might once more be kindled, if only for a moment, into a flame.

Sometimes, exhausted from the day's work, he would look at his incomplete painting and ask: "How near is it to the vision?" and the answer would be: "Still very, very far!" Then his courage would sink and his task would seem too great to be anything but hopeless.

It was in such hours of gathering doubts that Peter took out Virginia's letter, like a talisman, and read it over to draw from it new hope and zeal. Virginia believed in him—so he must believe in himself. And if he should

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win at last over all obstacles, then he would dare to claim Virginia's love, more precious than a multitude of laurel wreaths.

After all, Virginia in her earliest childhood was the radiant child of the vision, and the great sparkling eyes that he was painting with tender care were Virginia's eyes as they were sparkling still. How much he loved her he knew now as he had never guessed before her letter, heavy with fate, had broken into his despair. It seemed, indeed, as if the book of his love had been stowed away, sealed, in a corner of his heart and now lay open. For he was thinking of her all day, and sometimes he almost believed that she was standing behind him to watch his work and compare his painting with the vision that she and Peter alone could see.

Thus a month passed in daily toil. Then came a day—the tenth of September—when Peter asked himself: "What can I add now?" And a voice within him said: "Nothing."

Then he shut his eyes for a few moments, and when he opened them again, he saw the vision. A sea of blood-red poppies was gleaming jubilant and glorious; a child with sun-lit golden curls was standing in their midst, its radiant eyes wide open in wonder; and over all there hovered a strong, joyous glow of sunshine. Was it really the vision that gleamed before him? No, it was his own painting. But it must be the vision, for it had the radiance, the jubilant red poppies that it alone revealed! It was the vision, but it was the painting, too: for the picture and the vision were one.

CHAPTER XV

THE "RED POPPIES"

PETER woke up early in the morning, roused by a gust of salt air. He was at home! He was in the sunny room in which he had waked up at five years in the same way as now, with the view through the big window of the apple tree and the white house beyond. To be at home again meant simply to be Peter, the son of his father and mother, and whatever he stood for in the world outside mattered little here. Nevertheless, he had dreaded somewhat the account of his year in Munich because, though he had written letters enough, his father and mother could never quite understand just what the life of Bohème was for, nor why it appeared in such odd terms, and so he had lingered longest on his report of the journey with Atherton. But Peter did not have to do all the telling, for when he was once back in Gullport, the town was the world and the rest of the globe merely a provincial appendix. He had come just in time for Dick's wedding to Elsie Robins, as his mother had told him with great excitement in the first ten minutes, and, besides, there were several new engagements in the town. . . .

Thus echoes of the night before flitted through Peter's mind, as he lay drowsily in bed, but all the while there was a dull pain at the bottom of his heart: Virginia was

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away! Every morning on the steamer he had waked up saying to himself: only so many days more before I shall see Virginia and she will see the "Red Poppies." No one else should lay eyes on his life-work—life-work it was, for his life, as it were, had been sharpened to this point—before Virginia had seen his vision and hers incarnate. He had meant his homecoming as a surprise for her; therefore, as no secret was safe in his native town, he had not announced his return to his parents until his arrival in New York. And now Virginia had just left for a month of rest in the White Mountains with her mother, because, as Peter's mother had said, both were very tired and Virginia quite depressed, as if she had some great sorrow. Peter knew the ailment of her spirit and dared to believe that he had the remedy. But he knew, too, that he could not expect Virginia, who lived in a world of restrictions, to leave her mother, and, at his bidding, fly to her healer. No; he would write to her, and at best he could hope that she would shorten her stay in the mountains.

Should the "Red Poppies" wait unseen in the box downstairs in the hall, which he had sent ahead before he had left Munich himself—should it wait until Virginia would come and sanction his work? Then he could not send it to the big fall exhibition, which would come in a few weeks, as he had read in the newspaper on his way through Boston, and that was the one exhibition through which he had hoped to speak to the artists of his country. Virginia or the world? Why not both at the same time? He would send the picture off today, and when it should hang in the gallery—horror, if it should be rejected—he would lead Virginia there on the first day of their meeting again.

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But the "Red Poppies" should remain unseen in his father's house. He would take one more glimpse of the picture now before his father and mother were up, then hide it and take it himself to the frame-maker's in Boston this very afternoon.

So Peter jumped out of bed and dressed hurriedly, lest his father or mother should be down before him, and with a hammer opened the box that held his treasure. He took out the picture, set it up on a chair in the parlor where it had the best light, looked at it critically and was satisfied. His heart beat swiftly as he said to himself: "This is really mine."

Now for a frame! He ran up to his room to rummage among old frames that he had left at home and search for one that would be big enough. After much rummaging, he found one that might serve just for his own satisfaction, and hurried down with it, eager to see his "Red Poppies" framed in gold.

Peter rushed to the parlor—but he stopped short on the threshold, for his father was standing in front of the "Red Poppies." He was taking off his spectacles, wiping them and putting them on again; his mouth was half open, like a child's, in wonder, and in his dim eyes there was a gleam of timid joy.

"Peter!" he exclaimed, when he saw his son coming. "Is this yours?"

Peter knew that this question required no answer, that it was only a haphazard utterance, because his father, unused as he was to praise of red poppies, did not know what to say. Therefore Peter only nodded, and his father turned back to the picture and gazed at it in rapt silence. The spell was broken: Virginia was not to be the first who

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should see the captured vision! There was disappointment in that, and yet something less hoped for, something more unsurmised was happening silently in the parlor of his father's house.

Peter held his breath. His father closed his lips, opened them as if he would speak, but closed them again. What could be working in his mind?

"Peter," he said at last, "this is a psalm of praise."

The unexpected, the un hoped for had happened: Peter's father had called the "Red Poppies" a psalm of praise! More he could not have said, and Peter had not even hoped for the smallest tribute of genuine respect for his work from his father!

"I'm glad," was all that Peter murmured, inanely.

But there was joyous riot in his heart. Into his memory rose something that one of his colleagues in Munich had once said, namely, that all really great art appealed to the unschooled and naïve. Had he attained that greatness now which made the naïve—for none could be more naïve and unschooled in art than his father—pay impulsive tribute of praise to the fruit of his work? If his father would have come unawares upon "The Dancing Gipsy" or the "Laughing Woman with Mirror," he would have turned away embarrassed, as from a book in a strange language, but the speech of the "Red Poppies" he understood.

"Mary!" called Peter's father, when his mother was coming downstairs. "Come and see Peter's newest picture!"

Peter's mother came into the room timidly, as if she were afraid that she might not have all the enthusiasm for this newest painting that she would like to shower on her boy. But when she stood in front of the picture, she

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started, and an almost frightened "Oh!" burst from her lips.

"Why, that's Virginia in grandma's garden!" she cried out. "How can you remember so far back? Why, you were a little thing then—only six years, I guess! Oh, how bright those poppies are, as if the sun were shining on them this minute! Dear me, it makes me happy to look at them—it seems as if grandma were still living—as if we could just step down into her garden—as if you were little again and Virginia a baby with light curls, instead of straight dark hair! How could you ever remember so far back, and just how red the poppies were? . . . Oh, my boy!"

Her mild, gray-blue eyes were glistening and she stood on tiptoe to kiss her son on his cheek. This was almost too much for Peter: such ardent response from his own father and mother! If hearts could break from holding too much joy, Peter's heart would have been shattered now, had it not missed Virginia, who should have been the first to bless his work.

"I'm going to take this to the frame-maker's in Boston this afternoon," said Peter, "and then I'll have it sent straight to the Studio Club for the big fall exhibition."

"Oh, they'll take it, surely," said Peter's mother; "if they don't, they are fools!"

She blushed, for it was not her wont to speak in such emphatic terms.

"It's too bad that you have to send it away so soon," said Peter's father. "I should like to have the Taylors see it, and the Grimshaws and Elsie—all our friends would enjoy it."

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"They can see it when it's hung," said Peter. "If it's hung! I have no reputation as a landscape painter here, you know!"

"Oh, it must be hung!" Peter's mother repeated.

The family breakfast was merrier than any Peter could remember, and a joy—quite different from the cheer at his homecoming of the night before—seemed to radiate from his picture and reflect in the eyes of his father and mother.

Now that the spell was broken and Virginia could no longer be the first to see the vision crystallized, Peter thought that of all the people in Gullport, he would like to show his painting to his old teacher. In the course of the morning, therefore, Peter strolled to the hermitage. As he looked out over the deep blue sea that gleamed behind the boughs of the woods in their autumn foliage, he thought of his old teacher's son, and wondered with how much joy he and Cécile were feasting on the apple in the garden of Eden that he had left behind. How happy he was today to be back at home, away from the sultry air of "Bohème," breathing the salt wind of the sea!

He knocked with the old knocker on the door of the hermitage, and the door was opened by the wild man of the woods, shaggier and rougher to look upon than ever, but with a happy twinkle of surprise and welcome in his eyes.

"Well, well, Peter!" he exclaimed, in his gruff voice. "Back from Munich so soon!"

"Yes," said Peter. "I'm back. And I'm glad to be at home again. But I've had a jolly time with Jack. I saw more of him than of any other man in Munich—he's a great figure with the artists there."

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"Well, how is the boy?" asked Mr. Woodfin, with seeming indifference, though his eyes were sparkling.

Peter sat down in the hermitage and told his old teacher about Jack's work and Jack's studio and his jollities, and the part he played among his colleagues.

"No woman has got hold of him now?" asked Jack's father.

"There was none while I was with him in Munich," replied Peter, unsteadily, "but a thousand things may have happened since then."

For he could not betray the secret of Jack and Cécile, which had not been confided to him at all.

"Well, and what's your work been like?" asked Peter's old teacher. "Done any landscapes? I don't suppose so, pent up in the city there."

"Oh, I went on a journey through Italy with Mr. Ather-ton, and then stayed by the Italian lakes and in the Black Forest," answered Peter; "and there I did only landscapes. I have my latest picture at home with me now," he said, with sudden eagerness. "Do you want to see it?"

"I do—surely," said Mr. Woodfin. "I want to see what Munich has done for you."

"I'm going to take it to Boston to be framed this afternoon," said Peter. "I want to send it to the big fall exhibit."

"That's a good beginning," said Mr. Woodfin; "I'll go right over with you now and look at it."

This was the response for which Peter had hoped. He walked home at the side of his old teacher, as in the days when they used to go sketching together, but on the walk he was growing worried by the thought that Mr. Woodfin might not be satisfied with the "Red Poppies." What

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if he should shake his head or remain silent, or even have some fault to find?

When they reached the gate of the yard, Peter hoped that something would happen to delay the moment that he feared; but no intruder was coming down the street to detain them, and the gate stood open. There was no one in the parlor when they came, and the picture was covered with a cloth.

"This is it!" he said, in a forced matter-of-fact tone, and raised the cloth to reveal the "Red Poppies."

Mr. Woodfin looked and, as Peter had feared, remained silent. For a long, long time he stood thus silently looking, while Peter's heart throbbed as if he were waiting for a death sentence. Had he failed in the eyes of his teacher? . . . Then all was over! Silence. . . . Silence.

Mr. Woodfin spoke. "That's the greatest picture that has been painted in America these last ten years," he said gruffly.

"Then—you think they'll take it?" Peter stammered foolishly, for his teacher's abrupt utterance had made him a little dizzy.

"Take it?" repeated Mr. Woodfin, with a short, rough laugh. After a long pause he went on: "So Munich has done something for you—I'm beginning to think Jack knows what he's talking about!"

"Oh, but this isn't Munich," said Peter impulsively, but stopped short, because he could not betray the vision to Mr. Woodfin.

"What is it, then?" asked his teacher.

"Oh, it's what was left over from Munich and all the other stages of my career," Peter replied, then added, laughing: "And don't forget that I am your pupil."

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"I'm not exactly ashamed of my pupil," said Mr. Woodfin, laughing awkwardly, and started toward the door.

Peter could not induce him to linger and talk to his father and mother, for that was not the way of the hermit. In the doorway Peter stood and watched the great, gaunt wizard of the wood tramp down the street, and his heart beat wildly, as it had done when he was a little boy, and had first been granted lessons from the strange wild painter. If only Virginia were here to share some of his exuberant joy!

The week or more of waiting would be dreary, before he would dare to call Virginia back. Should he follow her to the White Mountains and in the happiness of seeing her again and spending days of undisturbed leisure with her in the peaceful woods, forget that the jury was deciding the fate of the "Red Poppies," forget that his life-work was anything but a painting like any of his other paintings, forget that anything mattered in this world but that lovers should find each other and rejoice! But a strong mystic belief in the vision that had ruled his life held him back: he would not now, for a few weeks sooner of human pleasures, strip his love of its crown, of the glory that, like Dante's love for Beatrice, raised his beloved from earth above the seventh heaven and wove a star-wrought halo round her head. Virginia had been the keeper of his vision, and to her he must reveal its incarnation, and he must crown her the queen over his spirit and his art before he woo her with the words of the lover.

Therefore Peter stayed at home and spent his time as he was wont to do in his vacations from school, long ago. Though it was late in September, he still swam in the cold sea and rowed against the strong wind, played tennis and

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roamed on the beach. Sometimes late in the afternoons Dick would be his playfellow, as in the old boyhood days—Dick, who had hailed him with a jovial:

"Hallo, old fellow! I'm mighty glad to see you back!"

But although Dick was still the hearty, loyal comrade, he was drawn more to his betrothed, the blonde, daintily-insipid Elsie Robins, than to his old friends. Harold, moreover, was still on his journey, and of his other school-mates Peter saw little, as they were at their work during the day, and the evenings he liked to spend reading in the library with his father and mother. Mira Mare was closed for the winter.

So the days passed tranquilly enough from without, but within his heart there was a storm of impatience. At last, in one morning's mail the letter came that announced the acceptance of the "Red Poppies." Immediately he wrote to Virginia, imploring her, for his sake, to arrange her return so that she would be in Boston on the morning when the exhibition opened.

"How conceited she will think me!" Peter said to himself, as he sealed the letter, for he had not told her what the picture was for which he was summoning her back.

But he felt confident that she would come: she must come! There would be something awry with the world if she did not heed his summons, and he would lose his faith in its goodness.

And Virginia replied that she would come.

"Why didn't you let me know you were going home?" she wrote, and that query seemed to Peter a good token. Her letter was brief, no doubt because she wanted to keep her thoughts till they should meet again, and it was enough to know that she was coming indeed. The ten

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days before the opening of the exhibition dragged on wearily, and every night Peter went to bed with a sigh of relief: "Now one day more has gone by!"

At last the day came. Peter was to call for Virginia at the house of a friend in Boston, where she had spent the night with her mother on her way home from the mountains. He took an early train and read the newspaper on the way in a strangely artificial calm of mind. It seemed like a calm before a whirlwind. Then he went to the house where Virginia was waiting for him, and the strange calm began to be disturbed.

In a dark drawing-room with old furniture and dim family pictures, Peter hearkened for Virginia's footsteps. She was coming! . . . How would he find her? Would she remember the strain between them in Munich? . . . Would she be kind?

Virginia came in, pale, with a new transparent beauty, and her dark eyes seemed to burn in their frail setting.

"Oh, Virginia," cried Peter, "you look as if you had been suffering."

Virginia shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

"Oh, I have only been suffering from a great ennui," she said. "But I think perhaps you can rescue me from it. You have had so little cause for ennui in your life over there!"

Was there a little malice in that utterance, an allusion, perhaps, to the Carnival ball, or had she spoken in all simplicity?

"I'll do my best to chase your ennui away," said Peter; "but you're doing this for me."

"What?" asked Virginia. "What am I doing for you?"

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"Going with me to the exhibit," Peter replied. "That means more to me than you can guess."

"I wonder what the picture will be," she said; "I've been wondering all the way on the train. Is it one of those I saw in Munich?"

"No!" exclaimed Peter. "Do you think I would call you for those? No, I painted it since I saw you last."

"Oh, let's go right away," cried Virginia. "I'm growing impatient."

She had her hat and coat on already, so they went out and walked to the gallery in the crisp late September air. Carelessly, easily Peter talked with Virginia, told her about his journey with Atherton, listened to her plaintive and mocking account of her dreary summer—not at all as if he were approaching the moment for which he had been waiting all his life.

"Now I am curious!" whispered Virginia, as they walked up the stairs to the gallery.

Gloomy doubts plucked at Peter's heart as the moment drew near. As one of the exhibitors, Peter had the right to enter the gallery half an hour before the official opening, so they met no other visitors.

They stepped into the main exhibition hall and Peter looked about him, but his own picture he could not see. This disappointment in the first minute gave him a pang, but he led Virginia silently into a small intimate room. There, on the short wall, alone by itself, gleamed the "Red Poppies."

Virginia stopped short and turned quite pale. She staggered, as if she had suddenly grown dizzy.

"The vision!" she gasped.

"It seems to frighten you," said Peter.

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"Oh, it's too wonderful!" she cried. "I can't believe it's true. I feel quite faint from too much joy. I can't grasp that I'm seeing our vision with my own mortal eyes."

These eyes were now glistening with tears although they had been glowing with ardor, as if dew had fallen on fire.

"Our vision!" cried Peter eagerly. "You have said it: our vision! You kept the vision clear for me—you are the real painter of this picture!"

Virginia was speechless and trembled.

"I love you!" whispered Peter, and when her eyes lit up through her tears, he drew her into his arms there, by the jubilant glow of the "Red Poppies."

It was a long time before they spoke again.

"You have to be willing to marry an artist, Virginia!" said Peter gaily.

"I know!" said Virginia, with a mock-sigh. "What a wild, capricious life I shall have to lead! But, you know," she began gravely, "father's consent . . . it won't be easy to get that. I'm not worrying about mother's; she always loved you, ever since you were a little boy. But father never knew you so well, and, you know, artists don't seem like real people to him."

That was grave! The old blind view that had blotted his joy at home, that had never thrown a shadow across his path abroad, was now looming up between him and his love! But what did that matter? As long as Virginia saw with clear eyes, her father might stay blind!

"If you are willing," he said, "what else matters in the wide world?"

Virginia hung her head.

"It does matter some," she said. "I want everybody to

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envy me and I want my father to be proud Wait!" she started with a quick gleam in her eyes. "I know what we'll do: let father see these 'Red Poppies,' and then he must be proud!"

Peter laughed.

"If a man thinks a painter is a crank," he said, "he will think so whatever the crank has painted."

"No, no," said Virginia, earnestly. "It can't be so. . . . And besides, I always wanted a secret engagement. Let's keep this secret until father has been here. You, too. And I'll have to tell father in a perfectly casual way to go and look at Peter's excellent new picture, and it may be many days before he'll take the time to indulge in picture seeing. . . . Then we'll keep our secret all the longer!"

"I love a secret engagement, too," said Peter. "Why, Virginia, we've been secretly betrothed ever since I first saw you standing there among the red poppies! Only it was so secret that we didn't know about it ourselves!"

Virginia laughed and Peter laughed, and they were like happy children.

"Hush!" said Virginia, when Peter was beginning to lay his arm round her shoulders. "Don't—people are coming in!"

"Bother people!" cried Peter, and drew Virginia to a seat in the corner.

"It's for them you painted the poppies," she said, demurely.

"No, I painted them for you," said Peter.

"Oh, listen to what they're saying!" Virginia exclaimed, glancing at the group of visitors in front of the picture.

Peter was too happy in this moment to heed anything

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besides his love, but because Virginia wished it, he listened to the remarks of the strangers.

"Oh look, May!" said a pale, elderly woman, in black, to a young girl. "Poppies! Doesn't that just suck the soul out of your body!"

"Oh, I should say!" cried the girl. "I like this best—all those in the other room aren't worth one of these poppies!"

"Look, here!" said a fashionable woman, who eyed the picture with her lorgnette, to her escort. "This has distinction. Whose is it? Look in the catalogue——"

"Loring!" replied her companion.

"Peter Loring—oh, yes!" exclaimed the lady. "He painted Mrs. Montague's portrait and Mrs. Odiorne's. . . . But I didn't know he did this sort of thing! There's something big about this!"

A reporter, who was jotting down notes as he passed from picture to picture, lingered a long while in front of the "Red Poppies," then bent vigorously over his notebook and did not raise his head for some time.

"How they're all impressed by it!" whispered Virginia. "Peter, I'm proud of you."

Peter shrugged his shoulder.

"Wait for the press!" he said, with affected doubt, but Virginia answered:

"You silly boy! You know you'll be praised to the sky. That reporter over there is making up a long story—he thinks he has discovered you."

While visitors came and went, Peter and Virginia talked with as much ease and cheer as if they were at home.

In their youthful egotism they barely looked at the

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other pictures in the gallery on their way out, and when they left the building, Peter felt as if they were leaving a temple consecrated to his love. When they were back in the house where Virginia was visiting, her mother, the beautiful lady of the garden, came to meet them. Her beauty was now at its height, the faultless aristocratic face crowned by silver hair, and the gray eyes more than ever lucid, like the sea.

"Mother," said Virginia, "you must go this minute and see Peter's new masterpiece. They are all praising it—I prophesy you'll be enchanted."

"What is the subject of the picture?" asked Mrs. Grey.

"'Red Poppies,'" answered Virginia.

"The red poppies of your grandmother's garden?" said the beautiful lady.

"How does mother know?" cried Virginia, astonished.

"Oh, before you were old enough to care," said Virginia's mother, "Peter told me and Mr. Atherton what he liked best in the world, and it was 'red poppies.'"

"You traitor!" cried Virginia gaily. "You should have told me."

They glanced at each other meaningly, as sharers of a happy secret. Unwillingly, Peter parted from his betrothed for two days without even a parting kiss, because Virginia's mother innocently stayed with them to the last. On his homeward journey, Peter lived the morning over again, minute by minute, and he was angry when the train stopped and cut short the beguiling procession of his memories.

At home, Peter's mother came down the street to meet him, and with curiosity more eager than any that

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she had ever bestowed on former steps in his career, she asked:

"How are people liking the 'Red Poppies'? Is it hung well?"

As Peter, bound to secrecy, could not tell the whole truth, he could not tell the half truth with much ardor, for the "Red Poppies" without Virginia's love had little significance for him on this day of days. So he told his mother merely that the picture was hung well indeed, and that it seemed to be liked.

"Father and I want to go in tomorrow and see it hanging there," she said, with enthusiasm. "I shall almost hate to have everybody look at your grandmother's dear old garden; it seems as if it were my very own—not like any of your other pictures. And just think, if some rich stranger buys it and hangs it in a parlor where nobody will know what it means to me——"

"Oh, mother," said Peter, "just because I felt the same way about it, I set such an impertinently high price on it that somebody will have to like it terribly much to buy it."

The newly aroused enthusiasm of his father and mother enhanced the otherwise dreary waiting for Virginia's return. Besides, there were the criticisms of his picture in the newspapers. The next morning, with hope and misgivings both in his heart, Peter snatched three different Boston papers from the newsboy who was passing by his house, and in the solitude of his room looked for the discreet corners where news was given to art-lovers.

"Has America Found Her True Spokesman in Art?" the headlines in one paper caught Peter's eye, and he read on:

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Not only this city, but the whole country can congratulate itself on the possession of a new treasure: the painting "Red Poppies" by Peter Loring, a young New England artist, hitherto known only as a fashionable portrait painter of little true distinction. This picture is not only an excellent work of art, but it breathes a spirit of youthful optimism that few of the jaded artists of the old world can acquire. Moreover, its message of light and joy cannot fail to appeal to the unschooled as well as the schooled observer. We should welcome Mr. Loring as the true American painter.

This was signed with the initials J. 'A., of a well-known critic, and the other papers praised Peter's work in a similar strain.

"Peter!" his mother cried from downstairs. "Come and see what the paper says about your picture!"

"I've got ahead of you!" Peter cried, and ran downstairs waving his newspapers.

In the dining-room he found his father and mother both bending over the same morning paper that his father held spread out, reading with eager faces.

"Oh, I'm prouder of winning father than of winning J. 'A.!" exclaimed Peter, when he saw the luster of satisfaction in his father's eyes.

"I think we shall have a famous son," said Peter's mother. "Just think! I shall feel so queer when I go to the exhibition and hear strangers praise Peter's work."

"You'll feel still queerer when they don't praise it," said Peter. "And I'm not famous yet, just because of J. A."

In the course of the day, however, Peter began to feel that he was at least a public character, for reporters from Boston were asking him over the long-distance telephone for the facts of his career and his opinions on art in gen-

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eral. When Peter had been a portrait painter under the patronizing wings of Mrs. Montague, the press and the public at large had left him well in peace; therefore his publicity was a novel excitement. One reporter was coming to interview him tonight, with the train that arrived at eight.

As his father and mother planned to return from their day in Boston on a later train, Peter sat alone on the porch, smoking, wrapt in absorbing thoughts of Virginia and a radiant future, when a tall, gaunt young man came sauntering down the street, and then skipped up the piazza steps.

"Mr. Loring," he said, "I'm from the *Herald*."

"Oh yes!" said Peter, and as the air was growing chilly, led the reporter into the library.

When the lamplight fell on the newcomer's face, Peter stared at him and cried out:

"Red Mike—I declare!"

"I wondered if you'd know me!" laughed Peter's old schoolmate. "I've changed a lot since schooldays—grown thinner—eh? But you haven't changed much, old chap, and look at you—famous; and me, poor devil, coming here to get an interview."

"I thought you had gone into fire insurance," said Peter, with compassion for the haggardness of Red Mike's freckled face.

"The place bust up," was the reply. "Then I hung round for a time and couldn't find what I wanted. Guess I was a square peg in many round holes. I lost faith in business then, and went into journalism. Here I am——"

"This is too funny!" exclaimed Peter, "that you should

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be interviewing me. I don't remember that you had any leaning toward art."

"This isn't art news, mind you! This is miscellaneous news about people in the limelight. You're famous, man! And let me tell you, Peter"—Red Mike lowered his rough voice—"when they told me I'd got to look at a famous new picture, and then go and talk to the painter Loring about it, I said to myself: 'Hang it! Nobody ever dragged me to an art exhibit yet, even if I did go to school with the artist.' But I had to go and—I tell you, I was never so—I—I was mighty glad I went. I never thought I'd like a work of art, but I tell you, Peter, when I looked at those red poppies, they made me downright happy, and I said to myself: 'There's something in it, after all.'"

Peter shook hands with Red Mike heartily.

"I'm glad of that," he said. "I like your judgment better than all J. A.'s high-fluting eulogies—though they pleased me well enough."

"Well, Mr. Loring," said the reporter, a little embarrassed, "let's come to business. I suppose you were born in this charming town?"

The interview soon lapsed back into friendly conversation, and lasted till Peter's father and mother returned. Red Mike ran for the eleven o'clock train, and Peter, after listening to his mother's glowing account of the crowds in front of his picture, went to sleep blissfully on his laurels.

In the morning early he woke up with the exhilarated sense of his beloved's near homecoming. At noon he met her and Mrs. Grey at the station, and Virginia's first words, when she had barely stepped down from the train, were:

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"Peter, did you know you were famous?"

She was in high spirits, and her pallor had given way to a healthy glow.

"I'm going to make father go and see the picture tomorrow," she said merrily; "I'll tell him there is a lion in Gullport."

"When shall I see you alone?" asked Peter, under his breath, when Mrs. Grey was giving directions to the cab-driver.

"Let's meet in Aunt Clarissa's garden, this afternoon—say, at four—nobody will trouble us there."

Then Virginia drove off with her mother, and Peter waited impatiently for the appointed hour in the afternoon, when he slipped unannounced into Miss Clarissa's garden and waited hidden in the bower. Only the sturdy purple and crimson asters and a few dahlias remained of the garden's glory. But Peter thought of his last meeting with Virginia in this same garden when her displeasure had sent him to Munich in pursuit of *panache* and the first meeting here, when he had told her of his vision. A long round-about way he had gone, indeed, to find his bliss so near at home in Miss Clarissa's garden.

Why didn't Virginia come? It was five minutes past four, and four was the appointed time. He left the bower and watched by the gate. Virginia was not in sight, but a great touring car was speeding down the road in a cloud of dust. The car whizzed past him, but in the same moment the lady who sat in it alone, with her face hidden by a bright green veil, raised her hand as if for a sign of recognition toward Peter, then leaned over and spoke to the chauffeur, who slowed down and rode back to the garden gate.

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"Mr. Loring!" called a cool, clear voice that Peter had not heard for over a year, and the green veil was lifted to reveal the face of Mrs. Montague. Why must she come now in this very hour of his first clandestine tryst with his own betrothed? Peter was vexed, but, nevertheless, there was a certain pleasure in seeing Mrs. Montague again, and he ran to the side of her car, where he stood talking up to his patroness of days not very long gone by.

"I stopped at your house to congratulate you, and was disappointed not to find you there," she said, with a cordiality that surprised Peter, because he had not written her a line since his abrupt departure. "I saw your picture and I was amazed. I always thought well of your art, as you know, Mr. Loring, but somehow—even aside from the subject—your style seemed quite different at the time when you were painting my portrait here. There is something great, something fearlessly simple about these 'Red Poppies' that I should not have expected from you. I am afraid I never quite knew you, Mr. Loring."

She smiled her old ironic siren's smile, but Peter today felt easily proof against her beguilement.

"We picture buyers," she went on, with a note of mystery in her voice, "will have to turn our backs on the European market."

In that moment Virginia was coming toward them, and the first look of disappointment in her eyes at sight of Mrs. Montague turned into a roguish sparkle.

"How do you do, Virginia?" called the older woman from her car. "How well you look! I see the mountains have done you good. What do you say to our young friend's new distinction? Have you seen the famous picture yet?"

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"Yes, I saw it the first day," Virginia said, demurely, while her eyes danced with merriment. "I like it, too."

"I congratulate myself," said Mrs. Montague, "on having my portrait painted by such a great man. What are your plans for the winter?"

"I have not made any definite ones yet," said Peter, with a sly glance at Virginia, "but I shall stay at home for a while."

"Perhaps you'll come and visit me in Boston for a week or so when things are in full swing," said Mrs. Montague. "I want to hear about your life in Munich and your journey with Atherton. He is back, now, by the way, did you know?"

"No, I didn't know. Thank you very much for asking me—thank you very much," he responded, with vague effusiveness.

Finally she turned to Virginia and inquired after Mrs. Grey, then made a sign to her chauffeur, and after shaking hands briskly with both, let down her bright green veil and rode away.

"Oh, Virginia!" said Peter, when the intruder was gone, "a rather terrifying thought has come to me: Mrs. Montague spoke so mysteriously in a way that makes me think that she might possibly buy the 'Red Poppies,' and I don't like to think of our vision as a decoration of Mira Mare."

"No," said Virginia, gravely, "that would make me sad. Yet I could look at the 'Red Poppies' then—but suppose they should hang in some strange house out West . . . I don't want to think of a single mournful thought today, though; I don't want to think about father and how long

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he will delay going to the exhibition—I only want to think that we're engaged——"

"And that we're all alone in Aunt Clarissa's garden," said Peter, as he drew her by the hand into the bower.

"Guess what has happened!" cried Virginia.

"Something good," said Peter; "nothing sad is admitted."

"I can sing again!" she declared, exultantly. "I went to see my teacher this morning and she said I sang better than ever before. And in the summer I had almost given it up. Just think, how useful love can be!"

"I think I proved that, too," said Peter, proudly. "But do sing to me now, can't you?"

"We can slip into the parlor," she replied. "Aunt Clarissa stays upstairs in the afternoons, over on the other side of the house. Come, and I'll sing to you!"

By a side door from the piazza they walked into Miss Clarissa's low, dark parlor with the lavender brocade sofa and chairs, the cabinet with curios of old days, the clavichord and the grand piano.

"What shall I sing?" asked Virginia, letting her hands wander freely over the keys.

"That song with strange words," said Peter, "that Italian song you sang once at Mrs. Montague's——"

"And that I refused to sing when you made me angry," said Virginia.

And she sang the miraculous song that had once conjured up his vision and that seemed now a song of triumph. Her voice was stronger and even more lucid now, and the sound of it made Peter happy like the sight of a bright clear color.

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In the midst of one song Virginia broke off suddenly, and stared wistfully out of the window.

"What is it?" asked Peter, alarmed.

"If only father will like the 'Red Poppies!' " she sighed.

"I thought you had banished all mournful thoughts," Peter replied; "and, besides, even if he doesn't, that couldn't alter anything between us. He wouldn't want to make you suffer."

"No, he would yield finally," said Virginia; "but I don't want to beg for you. I want to present you to my family as a gift of honor. And now I'll have to go and meet father."

"I shall be glad when this secrecy is over," said Peter. "After all, I had rather not hide my love as if it were afraid of the daylight."

"Oh, just a little more patience!" cried Virginia. "And you can just happen to call on me tonight—Mrs. Montague has sped out of Gullport," she added, mischievously. "So we shall be safe from intruders."

Mrs. Montague, indeed! On his reluctant way home Peter could not help seeing his 'Red Poppies' hanging over the mantelpiece in the reception hall of Mira Mare, and even the happy evening at Virginia's house could not chase away this phantom idea. In his sleep he had a nightmare of a party at Mrs. Montague's, during which the men threw the ashes from their cigars at the "Red Poppies."

Still a bit delirious from his dreams, Peter went with odd misgivings down to the breakfast table, where his mail was lying. Nervously he looked for an envelope in Mrs. Montague's large dashing hand, and to his relief did not find it. There was, however, a letter from

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the Studio Club which he opened anxiously: this must be the announcement that Mrs. Montague had bought his picture. His spirits grew faint. . . .

Oh, wonder of wonders! Was he reading real type-written words or was this one of the dreams of his restless night? The Boston Art Museum had bought the "Red Poppies"!

With the letter in his hand he ran, hatless and wildly, like a schoolboy, to Virginia's house.

"Miss Virginia isn't down yet!" said the startled maid.

"Tell her I have something important to tell her," said Peter. "I'll wait."

After a few minutes, Virginia glided into the room in a kimono of shining red silk, her long, dark hair tied back with a ribbon.

"What is the matter?" she gasped, with alarm in her wide-open eyes.

"The Art Museum has bought the 'Red Poppies!'" he announced exultantly, and showed her the letter.

"Oh, Peter!" cried Virginia, clapping her hands and dancing about the room. "Oh, how happy I am! Our blessed vision won't be a parlor decoration, after all!"

"I was sure Mrs. Montague had bought it yesterday," said Peter. "She looked so dangerous—and now!"

Virginia slipped her arm through his and playfully laid her head on his shoulder.

"Just think," she mused; "now all the sad and tired people can go and see our vision and for an hour forget their burdens, and in winter some poor, shivering creature will leave his garret and warm his heart by the glow of the poppies, and children and happy lovers like us will pour their own joy into the great world-joy of which the

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'Red Poppies' are shouting. Our vision will be the vision of many weary and broken souls—not only now, but in many years to come—perhaps centuries . . ."

Peter stopped her outburst with a kiss.

"Oh, Peter!" cried Virginia, and started when a rustling sounded by the door. "Remember, we are still in secret."

So Peter left the house and walked back as slowly and dreamily as he had run thither wildly..

"How do you do, Mr. Loring!" a high, very sweet voice roused him out of his reveries.

Peter turned round and saw standing at her garden gate, with a bunch of purple asters in her hand, no one less than Miss Fanny Runkle. Her hair, now gray, was coiled up as fantastically as when Mrs. Montague had first called her "queer," and she wore an orange-colored dress.

"I hardly dare to speak to my one-time pupil," said Peter's first teacher, with an engaging smile, "now that he is famous."

"Oh, but I hope you will!" said Peter. "What blissful times I used to have in your house on rainy days! You were always so patient."

"It's very sweet of you to say that," said Miss Runkle. "I'm sure I have had cause to be proud. Do you know, Mr. Loring"—she had stopped calling him Peter since he came back from Paris—"my father has been visiting a physician in Boston, and he said the family talked about nothing but the epoch-making new picture all the evening. Everybody is talking about it, they say, and even clergymen have mentioned it in their sermons as one of the great spiritual achievements of our age. That must please

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your dear father. He didn't care so much about your art when you were a little boy, but now he must be proud of his great son."

Peter smiled helplessly at all this effusion, and all he could think of saying was: "May I have an aster for keepsake as a token of my first teacher's goodwill?"

Thereupon the quaint lady blushed and presented him with a purple aster as solemnly as if she were performing a ritual. And Peter tore himself away to announce his latest triumph at home.

During the two weeks that followed, Peter felt that his cup of joy was so brimful that one more drop would make it overflow. Artists' societies invited him as their guest of honor; the hostesses whose favor he used to court, now sought him as a lion; editorials about the great American painter appeared in leading newspapers and reprints of the "Red Poppies" without their red took up whole pages of Sunday editions. And with his own eyes Peter could see in the gallery how the people flocked to his picture.

"Don't let your head get turned," Mr. Woodfin had said to him one day in front of the hermitage. "Remember that no matter how many admirers you have, enemies will always spring up, too."

This advice from the wild man of the woods, who had known little praise and much bitterness in his life, Peter kept as a kind of "memento more" to his joy in triumph.

But any check to his exuberance of spirits was of little avail while Virginia's love chased every shadow in his mind away. Only the secrecy of their bond made him impatient, because he would have liked to proclaim his en-

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gagement with pride, and marry soon. In his own native town he wanted to plant his new home, in some little house with a garden by the sea, as his desires for fashion, for Bohème and for solitude had been stilled, and he felt that now the time had come when he could draw strength from his native soil.

Peter and Virginia were musing about their future on her porch one cool, golden October afternoon, when Virginia's father came up the piazza steps, and abruptly they broke off their secret conversation.

"Peter," said Mr. Grey, in his deliberate, stately manner, "I want to shake hands with you."

Peter rose and shook hands obediently with Virginia's father, who now drew up a chair and sat down with them. What was coming?

"Do you know what I thought when I saw your 'Red Poppies?'" began Mr. Grey—he had seen the picture, and Peter's heart stopped beating in his suspense—"I repented that I had not been to see a picture gallery for six years; I repented that we have to go abroad to breathe an atmosphere that makes us respect beautiful things, when there is beauty enough in our nearest neighborhood, if we only find someone to open our eyes. You are opening many eyes in these days, Peter, and the people whom you are teaching to see will be happier for it."

"Oh, do you really—" Peter began, but Mr. Grey interrupted him.

"Then I thought another thing," continued Virginia's father. "We let our wives and daughters enjoy these beautiful things and bring up our sons to indifference. Why deprive them of the best? And one thing more I thought—only for a moment, to be sure, but I thought it,

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just the same—namely, that if I could paint a picture like the 'Red Poppies,' I should give up my mills and paint for the rest of my days."

"You don't need to give up your mills, father!" cried Virginia, jumping up, all flushed and trembling; "you can give up something else."

"What do you mean?" asked her father.

"Your daughter!" she cried, and Peter, as excited as his beloved, said eagerly and swiftly, as if in one breath:

"I want to marry Virginia—she has consented—we've only been waiting for your blessing."

Virginia's father tortured them with suspense as he looked from Peter to Virginia and back at Peter with a keen, sarcastic glance.

"I saw it would happen sooner or later," he said, slowly. "And I must say, I was afraid of it. A painter as son was not always my ideal. . . . But, now——"

"But now you've changed your ideal!" cried Virginia, clapping her hands in an ecstasy of glee. "Peter, wasn't I right? It's because he has seen the 'Red Poppies!' I'll call mother now. Come in, come in, both, and let's celebrate!"

And in the seclusion of the music-room Peter received the consecrating kiss of the beautiful lady of the garden.

"I adored you first of all," he said, touched with the awe of her beauty that he had felt in childhood. "Ever since the day I saw the red poppies."

"And I loved you, Peter, long before Virginia loved you and wished you were my son," replied Virginia's mother.

There was much rejoicing in Virginia's house, but even more in the parsonage, except that Peter's mother was a

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little sorry because her boy was passing into another woman's care.

"But I'm glad it's Virginia of all," she said. "I was afraid you might pick up somebody abroad."

An hour later, when Peter and Virginia were studying a calendar in the library to choose their wedding day, Lizzy broke into their seclusion and handed Peter a cablegram. He tore it open and read aloud:

Hail to the great American painter. Jack-Cécile.

"Oh!" cried Virginia, "your fame has been cabled to the papers abroad! Jack is Jack Woodfin, I suppose; but who is Cécile?"

"Do you remember the Carnival ball in Munich?" asked Peter, mischievously.

"Is she one of those masked ladies with whom you danced like a madman at that wild nightmare ball?"

"No, I didn't dance with her, but she was there," said Peter, placidly, "and she was ordained for Jack, even as you were ordained for me."

"I don't suppose you thought that in Munich, though," said Virginia, with a slight tremor in her voice.

"That is gone by now," said Peter, "and it seems years and years ago!"

A shadow had fallen on Virginia's bright face, and to dispel it, Peter said:

"Now, how are we going to celebrate our open engagement? What should you like to do?"

"I tell you what I want to do," said Virginia, and her face brightened again. "I want to go to the exhibition with you tomorrow morning, all alone, as we did the first day that the 'Red Poppies' were hung."

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"That's simple," said Peter. "We'll take the nine o'clock train tomorrow together."

So the next morning Peter and Virginia escaped the friendly felicitations of the town, where their happy news had spread swiftly, and rode to Boston. Though it was morning, a throng was already flocking to the gallery and the cluster of gazers in front of the "Red Poppies" was so thick that Peter and Virginia felt shut out from the picture that really belonged to them. But they rested on the seat in the corner and again talked as easily as if they were in Aunt Clarissa's bower, for it seemed to Peter that here, within the light of his vision, was his right trysting-place.

"Look!" cried Virginia suddenly, in the midst of their cheerful discourse. "There is Atherton—I haven't seen him since Munich."

To be sure, a little apart from the group about Peter's picture, with a serene and pleased smile on his lips, stood the philosopher. When he turned round and saw Peter and Virginia, he barely raised his eyebrows in surprise and came to shake hands with them in a more hearty manner than was his wont.

"Peter, you have found yourself," he declared. "I congratulate you and this country. This is no slavish imitation of European schools. This is an interpretation of the best, the most optimistic in American life."

"It seems strange to hear that from you," said Peter. "I was afraid you would find it too simple, too optimistic, in fact——"

"I told you," said the philosopher, with an enigmatic smile, "that you would outgrow me, too. You have thrown off the inertia of the pessimism that I cast over

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you, and you have emerged in health and have done a great work of fearless beauty."

"Even my father was impressed with it," said Virginia. "For the first time by a painting!"

"And my own father—"said Peter. "What do you suppose he called it? Nothing less than a psalm of praise."

"You see," said Atherton. "The man of affairs has stopped on his way to the market and has let a seer say to him: 'Behold, this is your dream, the beauty and the joy that you have buried in your heart since childhood, and that has been choked by the weeds of care!' And the Puritan has raised his eyes from the printed page and has seen spirit uttered in color—even in the brightest red."

"Oh, how true that is!" cried Virginia, while Peter was speechless with joy.

"I am glad," Atherton went on, in his light accent, "that the Art Museum was ahead of our friend Mrs. Montague, who, by the way, was severely disappointed that your painting can't hang in her drawing-room!"

He passed on to look at the other paintings, and left Peter and Virginia glaring at each other in silence. The group in front of Peter's picture had dispersed somewhat so that they could see the jubilant gleam of the red poppies and the golden-haired child all in the sunlight's glory.

"Do you suppose Atherton ever had a vision, too?" asked Virginia.

"No," said Peter. "His mind is always floating on a calm pool of beauty. But we who set out in pursuit of our visions have a stormy time and would be shipwrecked if it

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weren't for pilots who point out the way. If you had not been my pilot, Virginia, I never should have reached my vision at all. My vision—Oh, first it grew pale and then it was tainted and then it had fled altogether. And you have brought it back."

"I shouldn't believe that," said Virginia. "But I suppose I must believe it, because I see them gleaming right there before me: our 'Red Poppies'!"

(1)

